

Halo: Noble Wolf

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Summary: Noble Six comes alive as we meet the man behind the visor. Spartan B-312 is Mike Nantz, a man trying to live down a family legacy and his lone wolf reputation. Joining Noble Team he sees a chance for redemption but his interactions with them and Natalia Misriah, the headstrong, wealthy daughter of a UNSC munitions supplier are made more complicated when the Covenant attack Reach.

1. Chapter 1

****Part 1 â€" Legacies****

****Chapter 1 ****

****0530hrs, July 24, 2552, Pelican Dropship Golf-Three-India inbound to Planet Reach from UNSC Grafton****

With furrowed brows the armor-clad soldier thumbed the faded blue ribbon and looked at the tarnished gold medal that hung from it. He'd been reassigned to Noble Team on planet Reach as their Second-in-command. The thought of working with others was strange to the brooding Spartan super soldier. Ever since training he'd worked alone. Everyone told him how good he was yet there were so many black marks in his dossier from his previous assignments you could hardly find anything to read. Was that good? It all depended on how you defined it. Regardless, the Spartan was thinking of investing in the Sharpee Company.

The ride from Onyx had been quick and uneventful giving him too much time to reflect and ponder days past. Now he stood waiting to disembark, looking out a window at Reach. Still the same colorful ball spinning in space that he remembered with very mixed emotions. Some things didn't change which gave a measure of comfort. He'd changed, a lot, since he'd been here. It felt like a lifetime.

Hauling his gear into the Pelican in the frigate's landing bay the former Beta Company trooper was surprised when a slender soldier in red-accented EVA armor sat down across from him for the drop to the planet. The loadmaster hadn't paid any attention nor did the squad of UNSC Marines going along for the ride. He didn't know anyone else had been assigned to Noble besides him. The orders had said they were down one, needing a 2ic, nothing about another being added to the team but then Spartans didn't always get all the information either.

Lost in thought and the hum of the Pelican as it moved towards the planet once clearing the engine wash of the frigate the introverted Spartan didn't notice the armored female soldier staring at him. They'd come on together with a group of others heading for the surface but beyond a nod from a helmeted head there'd been no other acknowledgement.

"What are you looking at?" the curious woman asked the Spartan, trying to strike up a conversation.

"A reminder of the past," the stone-faced soldier responded hollowly, not looking up. "A legacy to live up to—a millstone," he added, barely above the whisper.

"A what?" the woman asked in confusion.

"Nothing." Snapping out of his reflections the Spartan answered hollowly, "It's a Congressional Medal of Honor, an award from Earth's past. It's a family heirloom and was won by a great grandfather of mine a long time ago for heroism in battle."

For the first time Mike Nantz, Mike B312 as he was now referred, looked at the woman who'd been asking him the questions. Though his full identity no longer existed Mike still remembered his full name and his heritage. He remembered his father and the last time they'd spoken, he remembered the family history. He remembered it all despite his attempts to forget. It was ironic that many of the kids he'd gone through training with at Camp Curahee on Onyx had little or no recollection of their pasts and desperately wanted to. He didn't, envying their ability to not remember. Fate was funny that way.

Sitting across from him on the drop ship was a woman in MJOLNIR Mark VB armor. She had blond hair with red streaks in it and piercing green eyes that bore into him. Attractive, gorgeous really in a predatory sort of way, something about the woman didn't sit right with Mike. Then it struck him. She hadn't been enhanced. She wasn't a Spartan.

Natalia has spotted the Spartan III while they were still in transit on the Grafton heading towards Reach. There was something about him, the way he walked and how he carried himself that caught her eye and caused it to linger. Sure, there were Marines on board and even ODS's but this was a Spartan III, making him special. Though she'd interacted with several in the past this one was different from the rest. She could tell by the glint in his eyes he was even more dangerous than the others and that was exciting to her. The man's short, sandy brown hair and solid features only added to the package. His grey eyes were like granite, but behind them she could detect a

sadness masked in anger.

"Hey, what's your name?" Natalia asked.

"Mike B312," he replied without emotion.

_B312_oh man, this is the one. This is the Lone Wolf, _Natalia thought to herself, her breath growing shallower as her heart added what seemed to be another 50 beats per minute in a split second. _This guy's a legend. No wonder he has that air about him. I'm definitely going to get to know him_, she added, breath becoming shallow with excitement. This guy was dangerous. You could tell. It wasn't the long scar on his jaw line, it was the eyes. _This guy's a killer_and very exciting_, she thought.

"My name's Natalia Misriah, but my friends call me Tali," she gushed, face turning a bit red.

Rather than pick up on the obvious interest Natalia was showing, Mike looked her over not as a man does a woman but instead critically, like a drill instructor does a raw recruit. "Is that Misriah as in 'battle tested for your home' Misriah?"

"Yes, Spanner Misriah is my father," she responded stiffly, aware of the implications already of his tone.

"The owner of Misriah Armory, huh? So where'd you get your armor?" Mike asked, an accusatory edge to his voice. "You some sort of new ODS or something since you're no Spartan?"

"No, I was issued it," the woman replied a bit nervously. "I'm with Office of Naval Intelligence."

"What division?"

"Section One."

Mike snorted audibly and went back to his musings, signaling prematurely the end of their dialogue.

The conversation wasn't going well for Natalia. As the woman fumed she could see the condemnation in the decorated soldier's eyes. That made her mad. Mad at Mike, mad at her father, mad at Admiral Parangovsky for allowing her on this mission, mad at herself for being embarrassed. It irritated the proud woman but in reality she couldn't fault him. Mike B-312 had seen a lot of combat. She'd seen a desk. The reality of what she was about to get herself into finally dawned. When the idea had been presented for her to get some field experience she jumped on it, feeling she could keep up with anyone, even the famed Spartans. But now, sitting in the dropship, seeing the look in this man's eyes, she could only imagine what the others would think of her. She looked closer at his armor array and noticed his rank, wincing instinctively.

Mike shook his head at the situation. Despite his attempts to go back to other thoughts he kept thinking about Natalia Misriah. Of course she had the armor. Connections. Yet again the idea that he was fighting for seemed to be corrupted. He'd endured the death of his whole family, the excruciating procedure to make him a Spartan. He'd served to the best of his abilities on missions that gave him

nightmares and made him hate himself. He'd given everything to the cause. Yet this was what he was fighting for.

Eyes narrowing, Mike looked more closely at the woman's armor noticing the Lieutenant Commander badge she wore. So she outranked him too. Great. She couldn't be more than twenty years old. Sure, he was only twenty-two but he'd entered the Spartan program when he was nine. She was likely just out of school in the past couple of years. Politics. It made him want to puke. She didn't seem so attractive on closer inspection.

Mike sat sullenly while the Marines on the dropship outdid each other with stories of what they'd do with their shore leave on Reach. Natalia was alone with her thoughts. Used to being the center of attention this was a new feeling for the confident woman. Doubt crept in, not only about this assignment but about many things. She'd always succeeded at everything, always won. What if she didn't? The thought gave her a chill of fear.

Natalia's datapad chirped, breaking the dark thoughts starting to build. The inbound call came as a welcome distraction. She smiled affectionately when she saw who it was.

MacKenzie.

Good old MacKenzie, she thought to herself. _You could always count on him. Like a faithful dog._

MacKenzie Wainwright served as a senior executive at Misriah Armory. He was educated, ambitious, handsome and athletic. In other words MacKenzie was every woman's dream. Every woman except Natalia Misriah. He was crazy about her, wanted to marry her. He had her father's seal of approval, being a protégé of his. They'd been something of a couple for over a year. It was the 'something' that she struggled with. Something was lacking in the man which she'd still not been able to put her finger on so she'd kept him at arm's length. It wasn't ambition. He had lots of that being the youngest man at his level of management at the company. It wasn't pedigree. He came from a prominent business family on earth, had gone to all the right schools, was a member of the right groups. It wasn't looks. He had all those, the kind that made the girls in the executive support group swoon. No, it was something else. Was it passion? Drive? He had all those but just not the way Natalia would define it. She'd had this conversation with herself hundreds of times.

Natalia set the datapad to text-only communications rather than videofeed. She knew that would irritate MacKenzie but she didn't care. She wasn't in the mood to see him nor have Mike be privy to their conversation.

Hello MacKenzie she typed. _You're up early_.

Business never sleeps. Especially when its business pertaining to you, he replied. _Let's go video. I want to see you__._

_Can't__,_ she lied, _I'm on a mission_.

Where are you? He asked.

_Can't tell you that either, it's classified__._

Come on Tali, don't play with me. You're on your way to Reach.

Of course he knew, she thought to herself, a wave of irritation crashing over her. Of course he'd know because her father would put that power into his hands. Was that what was bothering her right now? Natalia, always in control but not in control. Powerful, driven but only because of others. Or more to the point, because of one- her father. The man had given her everything and yet something was missing. Twenty years old and she felt like she was two. More to the point, stealing a glance at Mike sitting stoically with his back ramrod straight against the dropship wall, she felt like a fraud, a poser. That made her angry too. Then there was MacKenzie who couldn't allow her one day without talking. She was beginning to feel like a highly prized pet. _Where'd the armor come from?_ She thought to herself. Mike B312's words haunted her. Where? The same place everything else had come from. Daddy. She let the cursor blink for a few moments as she let MacKenzie wait and her anger settle down.

You still there Tali? The screen lit up with the question.

Good question, she thought to herself.

Sorry Mac, I was interrupted, Natalia typed. _What's up?_

Not much. Same old same old. Was out to the club last night. Wasn't the same without you. Everyone had a stinger in your honor. Celeste said what you were doing was crazy but the others shut her down. She's just jealous. We're proud of you for serving on the frontline. Just don't get too close to it, okay?

No troubles, she typed. _I'm with a good team and I can handle myself. _Some frontline- A short-term posting to the safest planet in the galaxy on a mission to root out Insurrectionists with one of the top teams in all the UNSC. Yea, the frontline. She imagined the toasts that would have been drunk in her honor and it made her sick to the stomach.

Fraud. The condemning word screamed in her mind.

_True, Noble is the best, _MacKenzie agreed_. Well, your deployment won't be too long. Then we'll be together and we can continue our conversation from before you left._

Natalia snarled causing not only the Marines in the Pelican but also Mike to take a look. Of course he knew who she was serving with even if it was to be top secret. There were no secrets from Golf 51979. She couldn't believe her father had his own UNSC call sign. She also didn't want to continue the tired conversation about marriage. Everyone was pushing her to it. Time to push back.

You better watch what your writing MacKenzie. This is an open channel and that's classified information. You wouldn't want to tarnish that perfect reputation, she shot back, intending to wound.

It hit the mark. _Sorry, I'm just concerned about you and this is an encrypted channel. I don't leave things to chance._

All right. Sorry too. I guess I'm just getting tense. Listen, we're about to land, I need to sign off.

Okay. No problem. I don't want to fight with you Tali. Call me when you get a chance, okay? I love you.

_Thanks for understanding. Talk to you soon__._ Natalia let the message sit for a moment, wondering if she should add more. She knew what MacKenzie wanted to hear, deserved to hear really, but she couldn't do it. Hitting the send button Natalia immediately hit the 'end communications' key.

She winced as she shut down the datapad since she knew she'd hurt MacKenzie yet again. What was it with her? Why couldn't she give him what he wanted?

Her friends had had stingers in her honor at the club last night. How nice. Stinger. That was her nickname. She'd earned it for her speed in the boxing ring and ability to wear down an opponent with her jabs. She'd not had a knockout punch but would sting away, always coming out on top in the end. Get in fast, hit hard, get out, that had been her trademark. That had been the hallmark of her life too. A quick mind, fast-tracked through school then tops in her OCS class. Placed in a position of influence at ONI. No, she worked fast. She had a wasp tattooed on her shoulder, stinger out and ready to strike, as a symbol of it. A national champion in the boxing ring she'd also earned that nickname with the men in her life. Get in fast, hit hard, get out. She noticed Mike was looking at her though she couldn't read the expression on his impassive face. Natalia could feel her face reddening which made her angry anew. She was acting like a school girl. Was he judging her? Having pity on her? She didn't need that. Suddenly, he didn't seem so exciting after all.

Mike noticed the exchange though he'd tried not to. The attractive woman, he couldn't deny that truth, had cycled through a range of emotions during the course of her electronic conversation. He wondered who it had been with. Husband? Boyfriend? Likely, considering the emotion. He'd learned to read people quickly and be right. He needed that skill-set working alone as he did, needing to know who to trust and who to kill. Things weren't always as they appeared so he'd become good at drilling below the surface. There was definitely something about this woman that didn't add up. The equation was out of balance. She was confident to be sure, even cocky, but for a brief moment he saw a flash, like lightning in the sky of something. Vulnerability? Couldn't be. The eyes don't lie though. Something lay below the surface of this woman. He tried to clear his mind but it kept coming back to the enigma of Natalia Misriah until he found himself looking at her. She caught his gaze, reddened in the face, but held his look. Defiantly? Pleadingly?

He'd be glad when this assignment to Noble Team was done and he could go back to being a lone wolf. People were too complicated.

2. Chapter 2

****Chapter 2****

****0730hrs, July 24, 2552, Buford Station, Alfold, Planet Reach****

A Falcon helicopter roared overhead then settled to land as the Warthog carrying Mike and Natalia ground to a stop at the small Army base.

The early morning trip from the Grafton had been uneventful. Landing in the military section of Manassas Spaceport the Marines had been met by a cigar chomping African American Sergeant that reminded Mike of Chief Mendez. A corporal ten greeted the pair at the drop site to take them on the bumpy ride in a Warthog to the base to meet the team. The friendly soldier chatted away with Mike who sat in the front seat while Natalia stayed silent in the back. Though he engaged in conversation the steady roar of the powerful Force Application Vehicle's 12-liter engine made it difficult which suited Mike just fine.

Unconsciously Mike reached up to the pocket in his armor that held the small case containing his family's medal. The story was burned in his mind having been repeated to him from his earliest age-how a Nantz family ancestor over 500 years ago had saved earth from an initial alien invasion, the first contact mankind had had with others from outside the galaxy. For his heroism he'd received the then United States' highest decoration. The technology they'd discovered from the defeated alien invaders had allowed them to make a giant leap in space travel technology eventually leading to the discovery of the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine giving man the ability for slip-space travel. Man had then pushed out into space, exploring, colonizing, growing, settling places like Harvest, Reach and others never encountering the alien life that had found Earth so many years earlier.

Eventually that was left to the historians to remember and families like Mike's who carried a legacy to live up to. The children of the original Mike Nantz had served in the military as had their children, and their children and so on until Mike's father who had commanded a ship for the UNSC Navy untilâ€¦. Mike didn't want to dwell on the past, especially not that past, he was already thinking ahead.

When Lieutenant Commander Kurt Ambrose, head of training for the Spartan III program, had pulled him from lone missions to put him into a team Mike had thought it to be a godsend but now he wasn't so sure. He was moving into a command position when always he'd worked alone. He thought back to his days leading a squad during the training of Beta Company and sadness filled him. Most all were dead, killed in Operation TORPEDO. He would have been too. He knew he should be grateful but he wasn't. All he could think of was that yet another family of his had been taken from him. And here he was, fighting Innies again. He wanted at the Covenant but orders were orders.

Natalia sat uncomfortably in the back of the Warthog, brooding. The idea to serve with a frontline unit had been an exciting one when it had been first proposed to her. The chance to see action, especially with a group of Spartans excited her in many ways. But now she wasn't so sure. This was different than being at ONI headquarters where her name and reputation not only opened doors for her but caused people to get out of the way. Mike Nantz, Mike-B312, the Lone Wolf, didn't seem impressed and suddenly she realized the others likely wouldn't be either. She felt her datapad buzz yet again and knew it was MacKenzie. That irritated her too. Couldn't the guy leave her alone for a few days? She was supposed to be a soldier on field assignment

not some school girl on a field trip. MacKenzie didn't seem to get that. Without acknowledging any of his message requests she turned the communications device off and stowed it in her kit bag. It was time to start to do things a different way.

The armored transport finally pulled up to a small, plain outpost in a desolate, unpopulated region. This area was out of sight allowing for the comings and goings of the Joint Operations Special Warfare Group Three's highly secretive team to work.

Mike was happy to arrive at his destination and begin to do something other than hang out with Natalia Misriah. Ignoring the brooding woman he jumped out of the Hog and walked swiftly towards the command post where he'd find Noble Team.

Entering the dimly lit structure he could see the person he recognized from the briefing presentation as the leader of Noble Team, Commander Carter, at the back engrossed in a video conference. Moving deeper in he nodded to a bald headed Spartan loading rounds in a magazine for his SRS99 AM sniper rifle. Another team member was sharpening a Kukri knife, an unusual weapon of choice, but then Spartans all had their own unique character traits. Out of the corner of his eye Mike also saw to his surprise what he took for a Spartan II. His MJOLNIR IV armor had been heavily modified but he could tell the early version of a Spartan anywhere. With a II, and one carrying a M247H heavy machine gun, no wonder this was seen as such a potent team.

Mike's musings were interrupted just as he was about to report to the CO. A blue armored Spartan III stepped in his path, stopping him dead. His initial surge of anger was immediately replaced with shock.

"Catherine?" he asked in surprise, afraid to believe his eyes. It was. "Kat!" he exclaimed, spontaneously embracing the smirking Spartan.

"Hey Mike," she responded with an amused look but returned the embrace even more strongly.

"What? But how?" the confused man stammered. "I thought you were lost at Torpedo," he stated, stepping back to make sure it really was her.

"You think you were the only one pulled from the company before that op?" Kat answered, leaving her arm to rest on his shoulder.

"Iâ€¦I didn't know," Mike whispered. "I thought all of you besides Tom and Lucy were gone."

"Yea, command does a pretty crappy job of keeping us informed," she responded, her voice becoming husky with emotion. Then a twinkle returned to her eye. "But I sure know what you've been up to."

Mike grunted then averted her steady gaze.

"You've been a busy boy," Kat deadpanned despite his discomfort. "Lone Wolf, huh?"

"Yea, sucks to be me," Mike responded darkly.

"Hey, nothing to be embarrassed about. You've done a damn good job," she responded. "I kind of like the name," Kat added, winking at him.

The way the woman had said it reminded Mike of how much he'd liked her accent in the past. It was good to hear it again. It was good to know she was still alive.

"Your armâ€¦," Mike finally noticed the cybernetic prosthesis.

"This? Had it for a while. Got it on an op at Fumirole." Kat caught Mike's pained look. "Got nailed by a couple of Hingeheads. Covvies got it a lot worse though."

Mike chuckled at the irrepressible spirit of Kat, something he'd appreciated when they'd been together on Onyx. He'd missed that too.

"So I understand you're here to replace me as 2ic of Noble," the woman Spartan smirked.

"You?" Mike stammered in reply. "I thought I was taking the role of one of your team members who was killed."

"You are."

"So why am I replacing you in the ORBAT?" Mike asked in confusion.

"Beats me," she shrugged nonchalantly. "The word came down from ONI High Command with your joining orders."

"Kat, I...", Mike wasn't sure what to say.

"No big deal," Kat replied honestly. "It'll allow me to focus on comms and tech which I like to do anyway. I'm just glad you're here," she said to ease Mike's obvious discomfort then added, "Listen, we can catch up later, we've just had a mission come in. A satellite relay is down and command thinks it's the Innies. We need to get this show on the road. Commander," Kat called out to get their team leader's attention.

Commander Carter turned from his video briefing to acknowledge Kat's call.

Natalia felt even more out of place now then she had travelling to Reach with Mike. He and the female Spartan from Noble seemed to know each other. The way she looked at Mike irritated Natalia for some reason. The other Spartans seemed to be sizing her up as well. Suddenly, Natalia Misriah felt very small.

"So that's our new Number Six," the bulky Spartan II commented to the others. Ignoring Mike and not even acknowledging Natalia.

"Kat, you read his file?" the Spartan sharpening the kukri asked, picking up on the conversation.

"Only the parts that weren't covered in black ink," Kat acknowledged.

"But we go back to Bravo Company. He's okay."

Carter tried to tune out the conversation behind him so he could concentrate on the mission briefing. "Anyone claim responsibility, sir?"

The officer on the video screen replied, "ONI thinks it might be the local insurrection. Five months ago they pulled a similar job on Harmony. They hit a relay to take out our eyes and ears then stole two freighters from dry-dock. That cannot happen here. Reach is too damn important. I want that relay back online Noble One."

"Sir," Carter confirmed the order. "Consider it done."

"Then I'll see you on the other side," the officer who appeared to be an Army colonel declared. "Holland out."

"Lieutenant," Carter called out.

"Commander, sir," Mike confirmed, stepping forward.

I'm Carter, Noble Teams leader," the Spartan formally introduced himself. That taken care of he brought the group together for introductions. "All right people, gather up," the leader of Noble Team signaled for all to join him.

The others came together in a semi-circle. Mike and Natalia stayed off to the side, one knowing he needed to be invited in, the other unsure of why she was there.

"This is Mike, B-312. He'll be our new Second-in-command and take the Noble Six slot," Carter informed the group.

"A-whooo!" Emile let out a mocking wolf howl.

"Stow it," Carter ordered.

"What's up with that Commander?" Noble Three, Jun asked quietly. "Why is Kat being replaced?"

"The order came down from the head of ONI Section Three and you know they don't send explanations," Noble's leader answered, his face showing him to be less than happy with the order. "Listen, he has the credentials and the experience. So you're just going to have to suck it up and get used to it."

The team members turned to look at Kat while Mike held his breath. This was a critical moment for his acceptance with Noble Team.

"No big deal," she answered the unasked question with a shrug. "Now I don't have to wipe your noses anymore and I can concentrate on what I like to do, other than kill Covvies that is."

While the others laughed Mike let his breath out. He owed Kat big.

Commander Carter allowed the banter to play out a bit longer so Noble could get used to the change, then he looked over awkwardly to Natalia for the other. "This is Lt. Commander Misriahâ€|"

Emile snorted, interrupting Carter, but didn't say anything. The leader of Noble Team glared at the unruly Spartan.

"The Lt. Commander comes from ONI Section One and will be joining us on this deployment as an adjunct operator."

"Adjunct, sir?" Jun, asked in confusion.

"Means we're babysitting her," Emile answered.

"She's here in an Operator capacity and will provide liaison support if necessary to the team. She'll have the designation Noble Seven."

"No way, sir! No way," Kat interjected. "This is bogus. We don't take this chick with us. That's not how we operate," she spat out angrily.

"We have no choice Kat," Carter responded wearily since he'd already had that argument with command. "The orders come right from HIGHCOM Bravo-6."

"I'm not looking after some spoiled little rich girl looking for thrills," Kat spat out. "She's going to get someone killed."

"Give her to the new guy to babysit," Emile interjected. "It can be his first command with Noble. Think of it as a team of two. That should be a good start for the Lone Wolf."

Mike winced, but could sympathize with the outspoken Spartan.

"Listen, I know you don't like this," Carter empathized with the team. "But we're only going after Innies here. The Insurrectionists have been active and command wants us to root them out. It's an easy mission. We do it, she gets her data and then she moves on."

The others groaned but knew there was little arguing would do.

Turning to Natalia, Carter then waved her into the group. "So, let's welcome Ms. Misriah to the team."

Natalia winced at the exchange and wanted to crawl under a rock. Used to being sought after, not rejected, she didn't know what to do so stood there pretending she hadn't heard the exchange. This idea was getting worse and worse by the minute.

"All right. Now that introductions are done, let's get at it."

The team left the headquarters and headed to the Falcons. Carter and Mike walked out together just behind the rest with Natalia trailing the pair. "You're riding with me Noble Six," the commander told him. As he put on his helmet he got to the point. "I'm not going to lie to you Lieutenant. You're stepping into some shoes the rest of the squad would rather see unfilled. Me, I'm just happy to have Noble back up to full strength."

The pair jumped nimbly up into the helicopter while Natalia had to boost herself awkwardly up. Neither Mike nor Carter said anything but

each noted the lack of familiarity with the ship.

"Just one thing," Carter said to Mike, showing he had more important things than Natalia's awkwardness in mind. "I've seen your file. Even the parts ONI censors didn't want me to. I'm glad to have your skill set, but we're a team. That lone wolf stuff stays behind," Carter emphasized. "Clear?"

"Got it sir," Mike replied. "I'm just here to do my job."

"Good. I'm glad we're on the same page. Welcome to Reach."

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter 3****

****0830hrs, July 24, 2552, Visegrad Region, Planet Reach****

The two UH-144 Falcons danced on the early morning thermals through the mountainous region of Reach. The trip from the base to check out the downed communications relay had been pleasant for the team. The scenery was ruggedly beautiful and the team's comm channel had been filled with the banter of soldiers who knew their job. Only Mike and Natalia refrained from joining in. Neither felt like they were part of the group but each for their own reasons.

Still in the mountains they could see the region of Visegrad open before them. Neatly plowed farmer's fields dotted the still rugged terrain as they moved into the agricultural area. Though a distance from the large interplanetary communications relay they could still be seen rising above the terrain. Instinctively each soldier sensed they were getting closer so the idle chatter died down until the team channel was clear.

Commander Carter was again impressed by the professionalism of his team. They'd been through a lot and he knew he could count on them when the chips were down. He took a moment to bask in the pride he felt. Looking around though his face clouded behind the reflective visor of his helmet. His new Six, Mike B-312 concerned him. The guy's rep was solid but he'd never been part of a team. Lone wolf. That was his nickname. The guy had a "hyper-lethal" rating. The rumors were he had almost as many kills as the legendary Master Chief. So the guy could fight, but could he serve?

The team leader was concerned about how B-312 and Emile would work together. Still, that was a lesser concern than the one he had for the addition of Lt. Comm. Natalia Misriah. Though she'd been given the designation 'Noble Seven' everyone knew this was only a six-person team. He could understand their shock and dismay at the addition. He'd only had a ninety minute head start with the call he'd gotten from Colonel Holland informing him of the addition to Noble Team. Why she was there was a mystery to him. Only one word could explain it-ONI. He snorted to himself in frustration. Some external agenda being forced on grunts yet again that they'd be expected to soldier through. Fortunately this seemed like it would be a straight-forward mission then he'd be rid of her. He figured Mike would work out to be a good Six and soon he'd be rid of Ms. Misriah. It would all work out in the end.

Looking at his datapad Carter saw they were approaching the outpost they needed to investigate. Time to button up. It was game time.

"Listen up, Noble Team," Carter called over the team channel to get them focused. "We're looking at a downed relay outpost, fifty klicks from Visegr d. We're going to introduce ourselves to whoever took it out, then Kat's going to get it back online."

"Just get me under the hood, Commander," Kat added confidently.

"Sir," Jorge cut in, "why would rebels want to cut off Reach from the rest of the colonies?" He was originally from Reach so had mixed feelings about this mission.

Carter knew of Noble Five's reservations. "You get a chance; maybe you can ask them, Jorge."

The members of Noble Team began to shift about, adjusting their gear to its proper fit, prepping for their insertion.

"Commander, we just lost our signal with HQ," Kat cut in, a surprised note in her voice.

"Backup channels?" Carter asked, irritated at the new development. Whoever had taken down the relay might be able to jam them. That or the mountains were playing havoc with the signal. That wasn't likely though.

"Searching...nada. Can't say what's jamming us," Kat confirmed.

"You heard her," Carter signaled the team. "Dead zone confirmed. Command will not be keeping us company this trip."

"I'm lonely already," Emile cut in sarcastically.

Carter stayed focused. There was something about this that didn't feel right. Suddenly this seemed way more complicated then dealing with Innies. "Shoot down attempts are likely, so keep your distance," he warned the Falcon pilots.

"Yes, sir!" the pilot of Charlie One replied, voice tensing.

"Let's stay focused," Carter warned the team. "Watch your sectors."

The two Falcons split allowing them to have opposite approaches in order to cover more territory but also make for fewer targets. The Communications Relay Hub came into view but there was no movement on the ground or around the structure.

"There's the communications outpost," Jorge pointed out rhetorically. By now the whole team knew something wasn't right.

"Reading a distress beacon," Kat confirmed everyone's fears. At the same time everyone's Heads-Up-Display received a waypoint marked 'Distress Beacon   Investigate'.

"Could be the missing troopers," Carter called out. "Let's check it

out." Looking around the commander of Noble Team found a good location for insertion. "Put us down on the bluff," he ordered the pilots. "Jun, I want your eyes in the sky."

"Sir."

The Falcons circled around the outpost then moved towards the bluff. Green grass contrasted with the dark grey of the rising rock formations that dominated the area. Flaring before landing the helicopters rejoined then dropped down side by side allowing the Spartans to disembark. Hitting their thrusters the transports took off to hover several hundred meters above the outpost with Jun and Jorge providing overwatch. By that point the team was already several hundred meters away approaching the station.

"Alright, Noble Team, Spread out," Carter ordered. "Watch the approach. Misriah, you stay with Six."

There, it had been done. In the flow of the moment Commander Carter had shown where the new team members stood. Natalia was embarrassed. It was bad enough that Mike had been given the task of babysitting her but the woman's team ID hadn't been used either. She was a name, not a member.

Mike cursed under his breath. This was going to be tougher then he thought. Orders were orders. Though Natalia had been tagged on the 'Friend or Foe' indicator on his HUD he still swiveled his head to gauge her position and pace. There were some things the IFF didn't tell. The ONI officer was already lagging behind, moving tentatively through the rough, sloping terrain. Rather than take the lead like he wanted to do Mike fell back to shadow the woman already showing she was out of her element. The rest of the team moved steadily down the hillside they were traveling towards the relay station. Halfway down Emile held his hand up to signal a halt. The rest went into defensive postures as the Spartan climbed a rock to look down at the outpost from the peak.

With a seasoned eye he surveyed the quiet outpost, looking for an ambush. "Structure point 3-4," Emile radioed on the team's com channel, "looks clear from this angle."

He leapt down and moved in, shotgun at the ready. Carter and Kat fanned out approaching from different directions.

"Distress beacon's coming from just south of here, Commander," Kat confirmed, monitoring the signal and other open channels. "We're close."

"Roger that," Carter confirmed. "Eyes peeled. "

The three Spartans moved swiftly onto the position with Mike and Natalia following just behind. What appeared to be a Warthog burned beside the small building that acted as the housing for the communications relay. The smell of burning fuel and melting metal hung thick in the air despite the filters in the team's helmets. Other than the sound of the cracking fire no other sound could be heard. The building was searched while Mike and Natalia provided cover outside. Mike's instincts started to scream at him. He couldn't figure out why but something wasn't right. A sinking feeling was starting to grab at him he couldn't shake. He gripped his MA37

assault rifle a bit tighter.

Coming outside Emile began searching some of the debris outside the building. "Found the beacon," he confirmed, tossing it in one motion to Kat.

"Make out any ID?" Carter asked, coming over to take a look.

"Negative, but it's military," Kat confirmed, dropping the now useless object to the ground.

"So where are the troopers?" Jorge asked over the comms from his overwatch position in the Falcon circling overhead.

"Why are we not seeing explosives residue?" Kat ignored the question, wondering instead about the unusual signs of struggle obvious to the seasoned veteran.

Carter as well had been thinking the same thoughts. Things were not adding up. "Noble Three, can you confirm any 'ex residue in the area?" he asked.

Jun looked at the sensors on the Falcon now wishing he was on the ground with his friends rather than up in the air circling overhead. "Hmm... Negative, sir."

"Plasma maybe," Emile mused.

"Can't be. Not on Reach," Jorge vigorously contradicted.

"There's a lot of blood on the ground," Emile declared.

There was. Multiple splatter spots with pools around yet no bodies. Weird.

Natalia could sense her heartbeat rising with anxiety. She could feel her breathing getting shallower too. The quiet of the base was eerily unsettling. She'd been through all sorts of training scenarios at the Academy, some even more realistic than this. But this was real, it was no simulation. That was real blood from real soldiers soaking up the ground. She looked over at Mike who stood unmoving. She wondered what he was thinking inside his visored helmet. _Likely not having trouble controlling his heart rate _she thought to herself. When Commander Carter had told her to stay with him she'd resented the implication she couldn't look after herself. Now, Natalia was glad she was being viewed as an extension of the seasoned warrior. The ONI officer would follow his lead and show these people what she was capable of.

"All right Noble," Carter signaled the rest, "looks like there's nothing here. Let's move on. There's some other structures not far from here," he tagged them as an objective on the team's HUD, "let's go check them out. Charlie One and Two," he called to the Falcons, "we're going to hump it over to the settlement beyond the next rise. Noble Three, Noble Five, continue with overwatch until we get there. Call out if you see anything."

Two green acknowledgement lights winked receipt of the order and the team moved out. Emile took the point with Carter and Kat flanking.

Mike motioned Natalia to his front and left so he could cover the rear. They moved swiftly through a defile towards the enclave passing several Moas along the way. The large, lizard-like flightless birds seemed spooked by something. The team moved in quickly. With nothing on their motion trackers there was a mixture of relief but apprehension.

Just below the rise Kat caught sight of something. "Smoke at the next structure, boss," she reported to the commander.

"Circle west and check it out," Carter ordered. He knew something was up and it was time to get serious. "Noble Team: you have permission to engage, but be selective. We don't need to telegraph our presence."

Safeties came off and Noble Team went weapons free. Moving the short distance towards the first structure through a series of rising rocks, the Spartans crested a small rise and moved to the left. Coming to a walkway leading to a deck Noble arrived at the first home in the community. Sitting on a cliff side the place had an impressive view of the valley below. It was likely pretty nice at sunset but no one was thinking of that at this point. The team came in, weapons tracking all around, looking for the missing soldiers or signs of hostiles. Still, there was nothing.

"Noble Six, move into the house," Carter ordered Mike. "Go in quiet. I'm right behind you."

Mike entered in low, hugging the wall to provide less of a target. MA37 leveled he went into the darkness of the unlit home. Natalia wasn't sure what to do since she'd been given no orders so followed Mike into the building. Carter came after her, ignoring the woman. Scanning quickly all around the place was clear. No one was home though there were signs it had been occupied recently.

"Noble Leader, I'm seeing heat-sigs in the structure ahead!" Jun reported from above over the team channel.

A marker popped up on the HUD so Carter hand-signaled Mike and Natalia to follow him to the location. Moving up a short flight of steps inside the structure they emerged onto the other side of the house just as one of the Falcons dropped Jorge off in the courtyard. The team fanned out moving cautiously towards the building where they were all picking up contacts. Though the IFF indicator showed neutral no one was taking any chances.

Halfway there a door opened and a middle aged man stepped out. Noble Team dropped into a covering position as the man who was dressed like a farmer began to yell in a high state of agitation in a language that wasn't familiar. Inside it seemed there were other civilians huddling together.

"Move! On your knees, now!" Emile ordered, aiming his shotgun at the center of the man's chest.

The farmer raised his hands and took a step back continuing to yell in a language neither Mike nor Natalia could understand but it was clear he was scared and wanted to tell them something.

Jorge stepped between Emile and the scared civilian. "They're not

rebels, they're farmers. Look at them," the big Spartan II declared in agitation blocking his teammate.

"Ask him what they're doing here," Carter ordered, scanning the perimeter for any movement.

Jorge began to question the man in his native tongue. The familiarity caused the farmer to settle down and he began to tell the Spartan what had been going on as Jorge translated. They had a back-and-forth conversation in what by now the others had figured out to be Hungarian before the pair paused

"They're hiding, sir," Jorge reported as the man looked around nervously. "Neighbors were attacked last night. He heard screams, gunfire. It stopped around sunrise."

The man seemed to figure out what the big man was saying so added some further commentary in his native tongue.

"He says something in the fields...killed his son," Jorge translated, fingers tightening on his heavy machine gun.

"Something?" Carter asked, picking up on the civilians fear.

"Commander, be advised," Jun cut in on the comms, "I'm reading heat signatures at the structure directly east from your position. Over."

"Copy that," Carter acknowledged. He gestured to Jorge, "Get them back inside."

Jorge spoke to the civilian urgently, gesturing to the man and the others to get inside and stay there.

From there the team sprinted east towards the building the indicator was showing. Crossing a walkway the team moved around another rock outcropping and moved higher to where the building in question had been marked. With the team spread out to cover Jorge and Mike prepare to enter the dark structure.

"We're moving in, Commander," Jorge reported when the pair was set. Getting a thumbs up from the team leader they burst in.

The sight was startling, even for seasoned combat veterans. Several human bodies were in the room including two wearing uniforms who were pinned to the wall. Blood lay pooled all about, while flies buzzed happily around the beaten and battered bodies.

"Damn...", was all Carter could say as he entered in. Moving to the Army troopers he knelt down to examine the bodies.

Natalia came in behind the officer, not knowing what she'd find. Coming onto the dead humans the sight of their grotesquely twisted bodies and death masks marring their faces startled the woman. Gagging involuntarily she swore to herself since she'd done it on an open channel.

"First time, ma'am?" Kat asked derisively walking past Natalia.

"No, of course not," Natalia lied. "My stomachs just acting up. Must have been something I ate."

Kat snorted but said nothing, kneeling down to inspect a set of avian-like footprints that could be seen in the blood.

"Fill me in, Commander," Jun called out over the comms, "what are you seeing? Over."

"We've got military casualties, two of the missing troopers," Carter confirmed, hunched over the bloody bodies. "Looks like they were interrogated...It's messy."

Noble Team's commander stood up and though his face was hidden by his helmet it was obvious from the Spartan's body language he was seething with anger. Without saying a word Carter signaled the team to keep moving. Pressing on the team entered an adjacent room with another dead body in it. Then from above the sound of scrabbling feet on the metal roof could be heard. A red blip appeared on the team's IFF tracker for a moment and then was lost.

"Movement," Carter called out. "Watch your motion trackers."

"What the hell was that?" Emile wondered as the other moved around, looking up and down for signs of the hostile.

"Jun, you see anything?" Carter asked his sniper in the Falcon.

"Negative," Jun reported in a frustrated voice. "Thermal's clean."

The team moved out of the building and into the open. Traveling in a defensive posture Natalia realized Mike had moved her into the center of the diamond formation they went in. She wasn't sure whether to be thankful or angry. Her emotions were on overdrive and she could feel her heart beating in her throat. The temperature control in her armor had already kicked in to compensate for her elevated body heat. Though she wore the same type of armor as the Spartans of Noble Team, since she hadn't been genetically altered she didn't have the physical ability to manage it but the suit had been modified instead to work for her, courtesy of her father.

Mike had the right flank as the team moved towards another building. It was quiet outside; there was no movement of animal or bird. The sight of the mutilated soldiers especially had upset him. He'd seen that too many times on previous assignments, feeling helpless. Coming into a situation too late was something that still angered him. He could tell Carter felt the same way which began to build a bond with him and the other Spartan III. He kept an eye though on Natalia Misriah who moved to his left in the center of their formation. The woman was keeping pace but it seemed from the way she kept jerking her head back and forth that she really wasn't sure what she was doing_. Better be a fast learner_ he thought to himself because something was about to hit the fan. He could feel it. His instincts had kept him alive all these years and never lied to him.

Noble moved into the next building and began to sweep it from end to end. Thankfully there were no more bodies but the signs of a hasty departure were all over. Moving through light spilled in from their

front indicating the likelihood of a large picture window.

"Boss, I see movement, outside your structure!" Jun urgently reported over the comms.

At the same time multiple red blips popped up on the team's IFFs.

"Noble Two, move up to the west," Carter ordered Kat immediately sensing danger. "We're about to be flanked."

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter 4****

****0944hrs, July 24, 2552, Visegrad Region, Planet Reach****

The IFF in Natalia's HUD began to splash red beyond their position indicating hostile targets. She could feel her heart racing but did the best she could to keep her breathing under control. Sliding over to the set of picture windows looking out to the plain outside the team fanned out to seek out their contacts. Several squat, waddling forms could be seen moving towards the structure along with a number of taller avian-like creatures with pronounced snouts in support. One of them looked up at the top floor of the building seeing Noble Team and began squawking in alarm. All this happened around the same time so the shock for both sides was genuine. Several of the team called out in surprise but all now knew what they faced: Covenant.

The impossible had happened, somehow the Covenant were on Reach. Regardless of how it happened, there wasn't time for reflection. Instead it was time for action.

"Contact, contact!" Commander Carter called out on the open channel, "Spartans, assist!"

Natalia wasn't sure if the call for Spartans to help was a pointed remark towards her. In the heat of the moment it was unlikely the leader of the unit would make that kind of comment. More likely it showed subconsciously how the woman was viewed which wasn't encouraging. It didn't matter. She could feel panic welling up like bile as she looked at the creatures she'd only seen in pictures and video before moving in for the attack.

Mike saw the familiar sight of Covenant Grunts running about in alarm at their discovery while a group of Skirmishers bolted towards the building, running into the basement level. His heart sank as he realized the implications of this discovery. Though it looked like a raiding party the Covenant always moved in force, never doing anything in half measure. More unsettling was how they were able to approach and land on Reach undetected. Who knew how many were already on the planet?

"Noble Team, prepare to repel. Engage hostiles, weapons free."

The individual musing of the new members of Noble Team was cut off by the call of Commander Carter. "They're heading into the basement. Move down to the lower levels!" he ordered.

The team found stairs and moved down quickly. Mike was to the right of Emile who sprinted the steps three at a time. The aggressive Spartan spotted a Skirmisher coming up to the stairs. Before the attacker could raise its weapon Emile's shotgun belched, blowing the alien onto its back. Mike spotted a pair coming out of the sun to the lower level. While their eyes adjusted Mike brought his MA37 up letting rip a long burst that cut the Skirmishers down. Efficiently the Spartans cleared the lower level of the building then prepared to move outside into the courtyard. Instead they were met by a wall of plasma fire coming from all directions. Several times Mike and Emile tried to press out but each time they encountered enough enemy fire to push them back. Grunts with plasma rifles and pistols kept up a steady fire while Jackals sniped at them from above.

Jorge arrived and added firepower from his M247H Heavy Machine Gun allowing Mike to switch to his M6G pistol. Squatting down to lower his silhouette to get a good shot it didn't really work for the 6' 9" armor clad Spartan. Still, they needed to knock the snipers out to get away from the bottle neck. Ignoring the hits he was taking, thumbing the 2x's scope he looked for the openings in the Jackal's shields and systematically knocked them out of their advantageous position with the pistol's armor-piercing, high-explosive rounds.

Losing their covering firepower the Grunts were forced to fall back giving Noble an opportunity. Without hesitating the Spartans moved out into the courtyard of the structure to engage the growing number of creatures rallying to the sound of battle.

Natalia had followed behind the team down the stairs unsure what to do. The woman was amazed at the reaction speed of the Spartans. Before she could see the basement already the sound of battle filled the air and seemed to be moving outside. Her IFF filled up with swirling contacts and the moving friendly tags of Noble Team. Not wanting to be left behind and also to prove she belonged with them, the aggressive woman put on a burst of speed to catch up. Sprinting outside her helmet visor adjusted to the bright sunshine as her eyes did the same thing. Already Noble Team had cleared the farm's courtyard and had moved efficiently across a footbridge in an attempt to secure the farm structure from Covenant reinforcements that had just been dropped beyond the horizon.

Already the battle was hot with armored slugs buzzing like angry bees and plasmas bolts and Needler rounds flying like fireworks. The fight was fluid with Spartans and Covenant flitting around, looking for any advantage.

Natalia had trouble processing the action and looking for a place to help out. Unsure what to do, she ended up stopping dead in her tracks in the open. Coming from behind several tall, rolled hay bales two Grunts who'd been hiding waddled out. They saw Natalia at the same time she spotted them, each recognizing the threat. She raised her assault rifle to fire. Jerking the trigger nothing happened. Looking down at the inoperative weapon she realized she still had the safety on. That momentary pause allowed the Grunts to recover and both fired their plasma pistols at her. Caught off guard the energy bolts hit her square on. If she hadn't been wearing MJOLINIR Armor she'd have been dead. Still, the plasma drained her shield and an alarm claxon went off in her ears signaling her shield was drained. Unsure what to do she panicked and ran from the Grunts who also ran away from her.

The scene may have been comedic if not for the carnage all around.

A Jackal approached from the left so with the safety now off Natalia let loose a burst from her MA5B assault rifle but the rounds bounced harmlessly off the bird-like creature's energy shield. It returned fire with its Needler, the crystalline projectiles scoring several hits and draining her energy shield until the warning again sounded in her ears. While the scavenger fired at her Jorge swept the field with his machine gun cutting down Natalia's attacker as she fell back. Backing away to allow her shield to recharge she moved behind a tall rock that rose into the air like a spire and right into the path of a burnished armor Elite carrying an Energy Sword.

Though Mike was disturbed to find the Covenant on Reach in some ways he was happy he didn't have to fight human insurgents again. Now he could focus on his true enemy. He'd charged with Emile down the stairs and cleared the lower level. Now out in the open the seasoned Spartan had been systematically dealing with targets as they appeared. It appeared as if the group of Covenant was only an advance party so Noble Team was quickly dealing with the haphazard attack laid onto the farming complex.

Then he saw Natalia.

The ONI officer had stumbled into a group of Grunts then been hit by a number of Needler rounds. It was obvious to his trained eye that the woman was out of her element. He knew her armor would keep her safe until they could finish this skirmish and then sort the head-strong woman out. But then the Elite began to make a move towards her, seeming to sense an easy kill. Mike had no shot so disengaged from a pair of Skirmishers and sprinted to help the reeling woman. Though extremely frustrated with the development he was also doing something about it rather than let Natalia die. The introspective man wondered why that was. He'd seen death before, several lifetimes' worth. He had no connection with the woman yet he went to aid her even though part of him thought she deserved to die for forcing herself into this fight. Curious. The thought would have to wait since if he didn't pick up the pace it would be too late and she'd be dead.

The Elite seemed to grin as its four mandibles spread apart. Triumphantly yelling something that Natalia couldn't understand, it raised a glowing energy sword to strike. Frozen in place the woman who'd always been able to work her way out of a situation shrank back, nothing able to help her. In that split second before the death stroke came she calmly realized she likely deserved this end. She had no right to be there in the first place, she thought, and was only there because of the influence of her father and her own pride. That stung, more likely than the sword would hurt. Natalia was sad she'd not be able to live long enough to do something about this revelation.

Roaring in victory the Elite swung with all its power so didn't see the rushing Spartan who slammed into the side of the taller Sangheili.

Mike had timed his rush perfectly. He caught the Elite unaware in mid-strike. Driving his shoulder into the armored creature's midsection he heard the wind rush out of the Elite's lungs. At the same time the Spartan snapped his head up to catch the Elite under

the chin. The twin force was enough to stagger the bigger creature. Too close to use his weapons Mike instead swung the butt-end of his Assault Rifle around catching it on the side of the head. The Elite stumbled and fell to its knees, shield drained, dropping its sword. Mike battered away savagely at the head of the defenseless creature until it fell to the ground dead.

Natalia was sure she was dead then felt the exhilaration of relief when Mike Nantz came to her rescue. The savage fury she witnessed though watching the Spartan beat the bigger creature to death was not only startling but breathtaking. Hands blurring he swung again and again and again relentlessly pummeling the Elite until it move no more. He then turned to her and ripped off his helmet.

"You've got to keep up, Misriah!" Mike yelled at Natalia angrily. "We don't have time for you to learn on the job." Replacing his helmet and giving a nod to the chastised woman for emphasis he turned away and moved back to rejoin the team who were already pushing further out to engage more Covenant reinforcements that had dropped nearby from a Spirit dropship.

Natalia was left in Mike's wake, as the battle moved further away from her, with mixed feelings of relief, embarrassment, thankfulness and fear but also another, deeper emotion, she couldn't quite put her finger on welling out of her heart.

Noble Team pushed out from the farm to a small river fed from a picturesque waterfall where they formed a position to sweep the area clean of Covenant. Re-engaged, Natalia sprinted to catch up to the Spartans who were mopping up the mixed company of invaders. Face burning in shame the proud woman was determined to help where she could but found every time she moved to engage someone from Noble was already there. While they moved with precision she bounced around like a pinball trying to get involved. Then, just as quickly as it began, the skirmish was over.

"Stand down Noble, stand down," Carter ordered. "Contacts neutralized."

"Contacts?" Jorge exclaimed incredulously. "It's the damn _Covenant_!"

"Cheer up, big man: this whole valley just turned into a free-fire zone," Emile added, loading fresh rounds into his shotgun.

Noble's commander ignored the interchange. He had work to do. "Kat, we've got to warn Holland. I need you at that relay outpost now."

"Boss," Jun cut in from above in the Falcons that had chased off several Covenant aircraft, "I'm showing more activity to the east!"

"Copy that, Jun, we're on it. Six, you've got point," Carter ordered, assessing the situation.

Rather than wait, the team sprang into action with Mike in the lead. The Spartan felt odd having someone at his back. Charging across the creek they plowed into the Grunt screen trying to envelope them. The smaller, chattering creatures were yet again being used to run

interference for their Elite masters. This time three Elite Ultras were in the mix causing a difficult dilemma for Noble team. One on their own was dangerous enough but three with support would be a challenge. With Emile on his left and Jorge on the right Mike went right up the middle. Coming into contact he lobbed a fragmentation grenade to shake things up. The blast that followed had the desired effect. Several of the Grunts Methane breathing tanks exploded causing added chaos in their ranks. The skittish creatures scattered in panic waving their arms in the air. Mike encouraged their retreat with steady fire from his assault rifle. The action allowed the two other members of Noble in the lead to engage the Elites without having to worry about their covering screen. Emile pumped several shotgun rounds into the armored Covenant warrior who was trying to angle in. Each slug drained more of the Elite's shield until it went down. The Sangheili tried to withdraw but Emile wouldn't allow him, charging afterwards and pumping more rounds in finally putting him down. On the other side Jorge opened up with his heavy machine gun. Before he'd run through half a belt the Elite lay face down in a smoldering mess of its own entrails.

The third Elite had fallen back to rally the skittish Grunts so they came charging back in earnest, seeking to sweep over the three exposed members of Noble Team. Mike caught the move out of his peripheral vision so moved fluidly to intercept. Shifting left he moved through an animal pen that gave him some cover allowing him to flank the enemy. Bursting out Mike sprayed automatic fire knocking down three Grunts who'd come out from a roll of straw. His flank clear the Spartan then switched focus to the Elite who had to check his progress due to the armor piercing rounds pinging on its shield. The Sangheili warrior was satisfied his overshield would hold but he'd fallen for Mike's ruse. The assault rifle fire had been a distraction for the fragmentation grenade that landed at its feet. With a roar the warrior tried to move but was too late. The grenade exploded, shredding one Grunt but more importantly draining the Elite's shield. Mike followed up with pouring half a clip from his MA37 into the surprised creature. With the three leaders down the remaining Grunts scattered but were quickly dispatched by Kat and Carter.

Again, things got quiet. Natalia caught up to the group that had again moved quicker than she'd expected. The woman had tried to rely on the tactics she'd learned at the Academy but the quick assault laid on by Noble Team had been unexpected. She'd moved one bound, like the data text had taught and waited for them to consolidate. They hadn't, instead aggressively pushing forward and leaving her trying to cover a flank position that no longer existed. The radio chatter hadn't helped as the team called out to each other in a frenzied symphony she couldn't figure out. By the time she'd caught up with the others they were standing together, helmets off, assessing the situation. Jogging up she left her helmet on to hide the sheepish look on her face.

"Stop for some sightseeing, ma'am?" Kat asked her sarcastically.

"Iâ€¦I got caught out of position," Natalia stammered in reply. She saw Emile roll his eyes while Kat sneered at her. Mike's face was granite, unable to be read.

"I think that happened when you left the Grafton," Kat replied

mockingly as Emile howled with laughter.

"Stow it Two," Commander Carter ordered, "we don't have time for that crap." The officer stared hard at the smirking Kat until she looked away. "Okay, we've got a serious situation here. This is no probe, it's an invasion so we need to get in the game and find out what's going on. Three, you copy?"

"Here sir," Jun replied from the Falcon.

"Our comms are still down and we're blind here. We need to get back on line and bring command up to speed. What do you see?"

"Commander, I'm seeing more hostile activity to the North-East," Jun reported.

"Roger that," Carter acknowledged. Then ensuring he had the team's attention he ordered, "Emile, you're with Kat. Six, Jorge and I will run interference on the ground. We'll meet you at the outpost." Seeing Natalia standing awkwardly off to the side he sighed to himself at the additional complication he had to deal with. "Lt. Commander," he said to her, "you may as well come with us."

"Noble Two, requesting air-lift, over," Kat called to the hovering pair of Falcons. Seeing Natalia following Commander Carter, Jorge and Mike to a flatbed truck they were heading towards she trotted over to the group. "Hey Mike," she called out, helmet off, "you take care. No more babysitting, okay? See you on the other side. I guess we'll have a wait a bit to catch up." She gave him a good-natured shoulder bump then glared icily at Natalia as she walked past.

"Get to work, Noble," Carter ordered and the group split to its assignments.

No one said anything but awkward silence hung like thick, dripping humidity. Natalia wanted to get on the Falcon and leave. She knew she didn't fit in, that this was a mistake, that she was in over her head, but she was also stubborn enough and determined enough to not give up. Okay, so she had no experience, she was out of her element and they were fighting the Covenant but she had abilities and was a fast learner. Something deep inside of her wanted to prove to Noble Team she belonged. It wasn't pride, or else she hoped it wasn't. No, rather, she wanted to contribute to something besides her own fortunes, perhaps for the first time in her life. She saw something in this group she desperately wanted to be part of. Then her gaze fell onto Noble Six. He hopped behind the wheel of the truck and fired it up as the other two got into position. If she wanted to be accepted by Noble Team she desperately wanted to be accepted by Mike Nantz, Mike-B312. The why wasn't as clear as with the others. She was still irritated by his rebuke from earlier when he'd helped her. No, he'd done more than that, he'd saved her life. Did she owe him? But that wasn't it either. Perhaps it was the look on his face when he looked at her-disappointment. She'd never disappointed anyone before. It had always been the other way around. In a way it seemed that this enigmatic Spartan could see right through her, which both bothered and intrigued her. Regardless, she had to correct Mike's perception her of, she just HAD to.

"Come on Misriah mount up," Mike called testily from the truck, "we don't have all day."

Natalia realized she'd been standing there musing while the others waited for her to jump in. Yet more disappointment to overcome.

5. Chapter 5

****Chapter 5****

****0944hrs, July 24, 2552, Visegrad Region, Planet Reach****

The flatbed truck bounced about as Mike kept the pedal down trying to reach the outpost as quickly as possible. They'd encountered some scattered Covenant forces, mostly long snouted Skirmishers, but nothing of any consequence. The road through the farming territory was rough so going was slow plus they didn't want to walk into an ambush. Finally, to their front they could see the roofs of another farming enclave coming up.

Jun's voice cut in. "Noble Leader, I'm seeing heat sigs in the structure ahead."

At the same time as the transmission was coming in they could see a Covenant dropship taking off in the distance. Mike looked at Commander Carter, unsure if they should investigate or press on to their objective of the communication relay. Though the team leader didn't want to delay he also wasn't sure if there were any UNSC troops in the vicinity either. Making the decision he nodded to Mike to enter the enclave.

By the time the truck came barreling in the place was crawling with Covenant. Grinding to a halt the trio of Spartans bailed and began systematically eliminating the hostiles and clearing the small community. Again Natalia was left to herself and wasn't sure how to fit in. This time though instead of trying to mix it up like the more experienced Spartans she decided to stay back and defend the truck they'd arrived in thinking that might allow her to be of use. From her vantage point she could see Mike and the others moving quickly about as the Covenant tried desperately to stop them. Despite overwhelming odds the invaders of Reach really stood no chance which the woman had to admire. Jorge would plow through those that would bunch up to attempt to counter the Spartans while Carter and Mike moved around the flanks steadily dispatching the more aggressive Covenant.

Again it was a mixed party of Elites, Jackals and Grunts who held the position. This time Natalia seemed to pick right because as the three Spartans moved into one of the structures to clear it a group of gangly, reptilian Jackals saw an opportunity to fulfill their natural desire to scavenge. Seeing the truck unguarded three moved towards it with the goal of capturing it as booty. Tali felt a wave of panic overcome her but then taking a deep breath shifted to a better position. She let loose a burst from her MA5B that bounced off the energy shield of the scavengers but it did give them pause for thought. Hunkering behind the shields they returned fire with plasma rifles, the hiss and crack filling the air. Natalia was in good position behind the truck so was able to avoid the brunt of the fusillade though several rounds did connect draining her shield.

The three Jackals locked shields and began to move forward in unison.

The woman held her ground despite every fiber of her body screaming to run. She wasn't going to be a disappointment again. She opened fire once more with her assault rifle burning through a whole clip.

Luck was with the woman since two of the slugs found their way into the small opening in the shield knocking one of the Jackals on its back with a round in the head. The other two paused allowing Natalia time to reload and open fire again. One of the Jackals was still assessing its dead comrade turning slightly and unconsciously opening itself up to the new barrage. It skipped back dead leaving just one. Unfortunately Natalia had misjudged her rate of fire and had run through another whole clip. She desperately tried to reload but the last Jackal saw the woman's dilemma so charged in for the kill happy it wouldn't have to share the prize with any of its comrades. Bonus for him.

Mike and Carter had moved systematically through one of the open structure buildings clearing it floor-by-floor. With Jorge providing covering fire they were able to move quickly knowing they were well supported. Mike was surprised how quickly he adapted to working with a partner in the tricky task of fighting-in-a-built-up-area. While all of Beta Company had done FIBUA as part of training it had been years ago and this was real time. Still, though it had been less than a couple of hours it already felt good to be part of a team.

The Covenant forces had not expected the humans so were unprepared for the attack on the first structure. By the time they made it to the second the invaders had been able to organize and put up a better fight. Still, with Jorge hammering away with his M247H heavy machine gun in advance it made little difference. Though progress slowed, already the Grunts were melting away into the terrain. There were no more Jackals to see and only the fiercely proud Elites stubbornly remained, unwilling to concede the structure. Without support though and with Carter and Mike working together the large humanoid, reptilian warriors had little chance. Noble Team held the advantage and the success they'd had at clearing the main floor bore testimony to it.

Mike had moved up the stairs to the top floor of the building when he happened to glance outside and caught the scene of Natalia's battle with the Jackals. He'd forgotten the woman was with them so his initial reaction was irritation. Then he realized she was defending their mode of transportation from the Jackals who looked to be trying to steal it. He saw the first two go down but knew the third one had caught her in a reload. Without thinking his hand went down to his leg holster and deftly pulled out the Magnum pistol. In one smooth motion he toggled the 2x's scope while bringing it up for a shot. The pistol barked twice and two rounds slammed into the back of the Kig-Yar's head. Mike surveyed the scene for a moment then satisfied continued the objective of clearing the structure.

Natalia had slapped the magazine into the assault rifle but in her haste the receiver jammed. The Jackal squawked in amusement at her dilemma moving in to finish her off. Then there were two quick cracks from the building behind the creature and it fell as its protruding head exploded. Natalia looked up and saw Mike on the second floor, pistol smoking from the shots. He looked at her for a moment then disappeared into the shadows of the structure. She was able to fix the jam and bring her weapon to bear but there were no more

targets.

It took less than ten more minutes for the elements of Noble Team to clear the rest of the structure and secure the farming community. As it turned out there were no soldiers and no live civilians. They'd been too late for this community.

The 'all clear' went out over the comms and the Spartans reassembled by the truck they'd arrived in. Jorge arrived first, gave Natalia a nod then began stripping his heavy machine gun to give it a quick cleaning. Carter arrived next, ignored her and called over the comms to Kat to get a situation report. Mike arrived last having swept the perimeter of the outpost to ensure it was indeed clear. The Lone Wolf walked towards the group with his MA37 perched jauntily on his shoulder. Natalia braced herself for his rebuke knowing yet again he'd saved her from a situation of her own making. Yet again she had disappointed.

"Good idea guarding the truck Misriah," Mike declared instead. "We'd have been screwed if the Jackals had taken it." Then as an after thought he added, "well done."

He hadn't mentioned her messing up the reload or his need to bail her out. The woman's heart soared at the compliment and she could feel her cheeks hurting from smiling so broadly.

Before the woman could reply Jun cut in on the team comms. "Noble Leader, I'm picking up a distress signal."

"Mayday! 3 Charlie Six, does anyone read? We were attacked by Covenant forces," a terrified male voice patched through yelled. "The Covenant is on Reach. I repeat: the Covenant is on Reach."

"The troopers?" Jorge asked, hopping into the back of the flatbed truck.

"I don't know. Maybe," Carter answered. Then, he ordered, "Let's move, Six. We've gotta find the source of that distress call."

"No disrespect, but don't we have more important things to do than round up strays?" Jun cut in over the comms.

"We don't leave people behind," Carter declared emphatically. "You see those troopers, you let me know."

"I have to agree with Noble Three, sir," Mike piped up. "We need to get to that relay, that's our priority. We don't have the time to run down strays."

"Strays?" Carter retorted incredulously. "These are UNSC soldiers under prepared and under fire. They sure as hell deserve more respect than that. I know you're used to working alone but that's not how I operate. Besides, if I was in a situation like that I'd want to think someone would come and help me and not leave me to the wolves. You clear on that lieutenant?"

"Yes sir," Mike responded coldly, stung by the rebuke and choice of the commander's words

Jun paused for a moment allowing the tension of the moment that had

been broadcast on an open channel to die before reporting the results of his scan from the Falcon overhead. "Noble Leader, I'm seeing possible friendly forces under attack south of your position, over!" he reported urgently.

Another report came in through the open channel. "We're under attack, repeat, mayday, mayday, 3 Charlie Six, we're under attack by the Covenant, I've got wounded, cannot hold this position."

"We need to find those troopers now," Carter said through gritted teeth.

"Roger that," Mike responded, knowing the team leaders mind was set. He'd never considered going off mission, of doing something contrary to the stated objective. As he gunned the truck's engine and threw it into drive he thought though about Carter's declaration that they don't leave people behind. Would he? Would the 'Lone Wolf'? Probably. It was obvious from his initial reaction that Carter had countered so negatively. Yet wasn't that the thing about command and what had happened to both Alpha and Beta companies that still bothered him so much? His friends, his family, had been sent out to die.

Perhaps it was time for a new way of thinking and, more importantly, of acting.

Jun marked the location of the UNSC forces under attack on their HUDs so they were able to get there quickly. It was another small farming enclave, like the two previous they'd encountered, set up on the rocky outcrop of the hill they'd just travelled up. Another Covenant dropship was disgorging its troops. An unsteady stream of friendly fire came in response from the structure. They'd finally found someone they could help.

"Noble Three, we've located the trooper squad," Carter reported. "Request immediate evac. My coordinates."

"Solid copy, Commander. Recalling Falcon Charlie 2," Jun responded. "Hold that evac position."

Mike punched the accelerator to the floor of the flatbed truck causing it to lurch forward in a burst of speed. Jorge opened fire with his machine gun getting the attention of the Covenant troops pressing the beleaguered troops. Mike slammed on the brakes and Noble Team bailed out systematically eliminating the Covenant threat. Natalia hopped out doing her best to keep up with the Spartans. Mike had driven them right into the center of a swarm of Grunts and Jackals so plasma bolts and Needler rounds zipped all around like colorful fireworks. The woman's HUD was alive with contacts and she found she couldn't process the information fast enough. Her heart beat up into her throat so she found herself again randomly spraying fire in a haphazard form more often than not shooting an attacker one of the other members of Noble had already put down. It didn't take long for them to clear out the attackers creating a lull in the action.

It was only temporary.

"Noble Leader, be advised: I have visual on inbound Covenant dropships," Jun called over the coms urgently.

Carter could see them coming in and knew this was going to be more than then could handle. "Evac transport, keep your distance!" he called out to their relief, "Six, hold this position. Clear an LZ."

While Mike looked around at the surroundings quickly assessing the best strategy for holding the area a tired-looking UNSC Army soldier moved over towards the members of Noble team.

"Spartans?" The soldier declared in awed shock. "Corporal Travis, 3 Charlie, sir. It's the Covenant..."

"We know, corporal," Carter confirmed. Then, trying to sooth the frazzled trooper he firmly stated, "Let's get you out of here."

While Commander Carter organized the main defense Mike had plan for securing a landing zone for them. "Jorge, get up to the second level, you're overwatch. Sweep the field and clear a path for us." He had several fire teams from 3 Charlie so to them ordered, "We'll move in arrowhead formation. I'll take point, you follow in my wake. I want nice tight bounds. Maintain contact and no breaks in our line. If we let them get inside they'll roll us up. Got it?"

The soldiers nodded, confidence visibly growing in the company of the assertive Spartan.

Mike saw Natalia hanging around the periphery, unsure what to do. "Lt. Commander," he said to her, "you go and support the main body of 3 Charlie holding the fort. Find Corporal Travis and report to him." He waited for no reply, signaling his group to move out as skirmishing had already begun.

Natalia stood in place alone for a moment processing what had just happened. In one sentence Mike had just given her a direct order and told her to place herself under a corporal. It had already been a bad day and the proud woman's mood was increasingly turning foul. _How dare he order me around like that?_ she thought, _and what is he thinking putting me under an NCO? It's embarrassing. I won't do it._

Then the reality hit her like a haymaker connecting in the ring. What else could he have done? Was she going to give orders? Did she have a clue what to do? She may have rank and privilege but he had experience and leadership. She could see it in the confidence the soldiers had in his presence. He was someone to look up to, to feel safe with. She was a joke. Despite her embarrassment and anger at being told what to do a stronger emotion grew within, the realization of just how much she didn't belong. Mike was helping her and he was allowing her to participate in a way he felt she was qualified. The hardest part for Natalia Misriah to stomach, who had always been ahead of the curve, was he was right.

Obediently she trotted over to the area where the main group of the 3 Charlie soldiers had set up to defend the structure. It didn't take long to find Corporal Travis, who was busy directing the fire of his troops. The NCO saw her come over and seeing her rank insignia and knowing who she came in with gave her a quizzical look.

"Yes ma'am," Travis asked, "what can I do for you?"

Despite her embarrassment at the situation Natalia humbled herself. "I'm here to help. Where do you want me?"

The corporal seemed genuinely glad to see her. Natalia realized the man didn't know her limitations. "That's great, we could use the support. How about you provide fire coverage to our right flank," he pointed to a spot.

"Will do corporal," she replied obediently, and then moved to a position where she could actually do something helpful.

With the combined firepower of Noble Team and 3 Charlie the UNSC forces were able to prevail without any major difficulty despite the size of the Covenant attacking force. Mike's team efficiently cut through their opposition to take the LZ they needed while Carter, Cpl. Travis' main body of 3 Charlie and Natalia were able to clear out the rest. It was definitely a confidence booster for those who were looking for it.

Commander Carter assessed the situation and confident they had eliminated all opposition knew it was time to get back onto their own mission. "Transport, LZ is clear. Move in for evac," he confirmed.

"Affirmative. Transport inbound," Jun answered from above.

"Okay, you're in the clear, corporal," Carter declared to Travis, "good luck to you."

"Thank you sir," Corporal Travis replied. "We wouldn't have made it if you didn't show up. You guys are the best. I appreciate you saving our bacon." He threw up a salute as Pelicans began their landing. Though saluting was frowned upon in a combat zone the breach of protocol was understandable. "Can we win?" Travis asked hopefully, almost as an afterthought.

Carter paused for a moment. "Sure we can. The orbital MACs will cover us until the fleet can get here. You stay focused and fight hard. We have lots of troops on the ground. The Covvies have bit off more than they can chew this time."

"All right. I owe you guys a beer when this is all over."

Mike heard the exchange and wondered if the Commander's optimism was real or put on to calm the shaky soldier. Had they saved these guys or just prolonged the inevitable? This interaction with others was way more complicated then working alone.

The Pelicans landed and the troopers from 3 Charlie began to load up. Noble team's Falcon set down also but they didn't move, raising Mike's anxiety.

"We're going to cover the evac and make sure they get away clean. There could be some stray Covvies around," Carter declared. "Six, you cover south, Five you take north. Once they're clear we'll carry on," he stated firmly, looking at Mike.

Natalia watched the interchange and noted yet again she was left out of the mix. Corporal Travis had politely thanked her for her help but

hadn't lavished any praise on her like he did the Spartans. But then why would he? The best she could say of that encounter was she hadn't been a liability. Something had to change. She needed to do something to contribute.

Then she saw Mike standing off alone in the distance, scanning the approach to the enclave. Taking a deep breath, Natalia walked over to where he stood.

Mike heard the footsteps from behind and knew it was Natalia coming up from his IFF indicator. _Great_, he thought to himself, _bad enough I get chewed out by Carter now I got to listen to her. Probably want to brag on her war stories from the last fight. This team thing sucks. I can get more done on my own. I need to talk to Ackerson and get pulled from this assignment._

Natalia pulled up and suddenly hesitated. The Spartan said nothing, just watched her as she pulled off her helmet. "Mike, Iâ€|,"

"What's up ma'am?"

"Don't call me that."

"Why not? You have the rank and the privilege."

"We both know I don't deserve itâ€|," she hung her head in shame, "and don't deserve to be here."

The statement caught the lone wolf Spartan off guard but the look in her expressive eyes said even more. There was remorse, regret welling from deep within. This was a genuine declaration, not some ONI trick.

"That's true," Mike acknowledged, now simply wondering where she was going.

"I want you to help me to fight better so I can fit in," she blurted out not able to look at the man.

"What?" Mike replied in genuine shock. He hadn't expected such a request from the proud woman.

"I want to learn how to be useful, to make a difference," she confirmed, "like you do." Her eyes rose meeting his, in them was admiration.

Mike wasn't sure what to do. He hesitated, part of him screamed to let her flounder, it wasn't up to him to bail her out, especially one of privilege who had likely manipulated her way onto the team in the first place. But then he began to drown in the pool of her emerald green eyes. Turmoil swirled in those awkward seconds then a single word tipped it in Natalia Misriah's favor: legacy.

Mike Nantz, the Lone Wolf, removed his helmet and met her look. Nodding his head, the answer he gave caused her to beam, bringing sunshine to a dark day. "Okay, I'll help you."

****Chapter 6****

****1310hrs, July 24, 2552, Visegrad Region, Planet Reach ****

On route to the communications relay flying in the Falcon that had come to pick them up, true to his word, Mike began to teach Natalia. The seasoned soldier shared the tips and tricks he'd learned not only at Camp Curahee on planet Onyx during his training but also from his experience over the years in the field. To his surprise, the headstrong woman was an eager student, listening intently and asking intelligent questions when appropriate. Mike found also surprising that he enjoyed the role of teacher and the fact someone seemed to appreciate his skill.

Natalia was in awe of the man who was only a few years older than her. Mike's knowledge of war was even deeper than she'd expected. He seemed to have the knowledge of a grizzled training sergeant with thirty-plus years experience, not a young man in his early twenties. As she soaked up the teaching she couldn't help but think of Mackenzie and compare the two. Her boyfriend had lots of knowledge too but he'd used it to advance his own agenda. Mike's, on the other hand, had been honed in the field for the good of mankind. Despite their earlier frosty relations she found herself first admiring then being drawn to the Spartan.

Commander Carter watched the two speaking with each other on a private channel. He didn't know what they were talking about, he didn't much care. He liked what he'd seen out of Noble Six, though there still was too much of the 'lone wolf' mentality. Still, the guy could fight and they needed that right now. As well, Lt.-Commander Misriah had stayed out of his hair, that's what counted. The mission was quickly unraveling and he had a bad feeling about what was about to come. He'd need everyone at their best if they were going to get out of this. "Noble Two, sit-rep," the Spartan leader called to find out how things were going with the rest of his team.

"We're at the relay outpost," Kat answered. "Door's locked. Mechanism's been flash-fused."

"Can you beat it?" Carter asked, knowing that wasn't a good sign but then there hadn't been a good one all day.

"I dialed up my torch, cut a way through. Going to take some time," Noble Two confirmed.

"Okay, we're en route to your location," Carter reported then signed off. He couldn't help but wonder what lay ahead. He had a new team member he wasn't sure he could trust to truly follow orders when things got tough and an attachment from ONI who obviously had no combat experience. It wasn't a good combination. With the size and intensity of the opposition they'd faced so far this was not a raid but a full-scale invasion. He'd need the team at its best if they had any chance of surviving. He wasn't sure if they were up to it. The reflective Spartan wondered if that was how the rest of his Alpha Company members had felt as they were sent to slaughter. He'd dodged the bullet, literally, many times and had lasted longer than predicted. That had to count for something. He wasn't fatalistic and after all he'd seen wondered if there was a God. Regardless, he wasn't about to give up. He'd fight for the UNSC but more personally for Noble Team to the end.

Mike continued to coach Natalia, amazed at the amount of information he had to share. The last few years had been a bit of a blur and many parts he remembered he'd tried to forget. His missions and service thus far had been pretty unsavory and he'd often wondered if it made any difference. Yet here he was able to share with an eager audience what he had learned. It might just be enough to save her life and allow her to make a contribution to the team and the war effort. The thought made him happy? He couldn't remember the last time he'd experienced that emotion so wasn't quite sure what it felt like. Regardless, a thought occurred to him that there may be others he could help with this experience. Maybe lone wolf wasn't such a good way to live. In truth, he knew it wasn't living at all but merely existing.

The communications spire of the relay post could be seen on the horizon so they were close. Natalia continued to listen intently to Mike as she felt her heart race with anticipation of what was to come. He remained calm at the prospect of more combat and shared with her from his vast experience. He seemed as cold as ice while she was ready to melt down

"We're approaching the com outpost," the Falcon pilot confirmed.

"Drop us in the courtyard," Carter responded.

The pilot looked down and saw the location was swarming with Covenant. "LZ's a little hot, sir-," he reported.

"Put her down, pilot," Carter ordered. Seeing Mike still engrossed in conversation with Natalia he barked, "Six, breaks over."

Mike removed his helmet wanting Natalia to see his face. He gave her a slight smile and nod of his head which caused her confidence to grow. Replacing his helmet as the Falcon began to settle for the landing he gave the nervous woman a thumbs up and said, "Okay, let's put what you've learned to the test. Stay on my right flank. You're my cover as we skirmish forward so don't allow any break in contact. We're a fire team now."

Natalia's heart soared. We're a team she thought to herself. I won't let you down Mike.

As the Falcon dropped down the pair could see the other members of Noble Team already engaged trying to pry the courtyard away from the Covenant. Before the helicopter touched down the remainder of the squad hit the ground engaging the enemy. The added weight of firepower from the newly arrived Spartans and Natalia tipped the balance in the human's favor so they were able to scatter the attackers. Noble regrouped for the first time since the surprise discovery that the Covenant were on Reach. The reunion was short lived as Commander Carter assessed the situation. Kat was already feverishly working on trying to override the main titanium steel blast doors into the complex that stood open so they'd be able to close the station off.

"How we doing, Kat?" Noble's leader asked.

"Taking a little longer than I hoped, Commander," she replied not

looking from her task. "I've cut about halfway through the door."

"Contact!" Emile urgently reported.

The familiar high-pitched whine of an inbound Covenant dropship could be heard before it was seen.

Commander Carter slapped a fresh magazine into his assault rifle. "Hold them off until Kat can hack the controls."

The Covenant Spirit disgorged its mixed cargo of Elites, Jackals and Grunts. Noble Team took the initiative and attacked before they could form up, scattering the group. But more kept coming out than another dropship arrived forcing the Spartans back into the courtyard.

Natalia stayed close to Mike, covering his flank so he could move freely. She remembered his tips on fire control and found herself comfortable in combat for the first time. Though scared and heart racing, she could see the battle unfolding before her and what she needed to do clearly, almost like watching it at a slower speed.

Mike, on the other hand, was a whirlwind. He had an almost sixth-sense for where he needed to be. While Carter and Jorge focused on covering Kat, Emile would flit about blasting away with his shotgun. Jun had found himself a favorable spot and began picking away at high-value targets with his sniper rifle. That left Mike to be the fist that repeatedly would punch into the Covenant forces trying to stream past the guard and into the relay station. Any time the Covenant massed to attack Mike would slam into them first with Natalia covering his rear, disrupting their tactics. The result was an uncoordinated mess that favored the more motivated humans.

The air filled with sizzling plasma fire and hissing Needler rounds, the sheer weight of attackers was extreme and slowly the Covenant forces were pressing the Spartans back towards the blast door. Despite their best efforts the ferocity of those arrayed against them caused Noble Team to be bunched up around the blast door. The Covenant really seemed to want to control this location. Another Spirit could be seen flaring to land on the rise beyond the courtyard. With a squad of Elites waiting to jump into the fray, this would be more than they could handle.

Commander Carter assessed the situation and knew they were about to be overrun. Laying a burst of fire into a charging Elite that stopped it dead in its tracks he paused to call out urgently, "Kat?"

"Just about...there!" Kat answered tensely, aware of the risk they were all in. Then with a metallic click and a soft whir the massive titanium door began to close. "We're in!" she shouted in triumph.

"Everybody inside!" Carter ordered, tossing his last fragmentation grenade into the center of the courtyard to clear a path. "Go, go, go!"

Mike had just finished clearing out a swarm of Jackals well away from the haven of safety when the order came in. Whirling around to assess

the situation in one motion he stuck a charging Elite with a captured Plasma Grenade. "Misriah, fall back to the door, I'll cover you," he ordered.

Natalia moved automatically, despite the scattering of Covenant between them and safety. Instinctively she knew with Mike covering her they'd be okay. True to his word Mike cleared a path for the two of them and they safely made it back to the door with only minor disruptions to their shields.

"Inside, cover the right flank," he commanded then patted her on the shoulder as she passed to move into the cover of the station.

Despite everything going on Natalia caught the unconscious gesture and smiled. _We're a team_, she thought to herself.

All the members of Noble Team congregated at the relay's entrance as the door closed. The concentrated firepower was enough to stop the Covenant cold in their tracks. Backing into the unlit foyer of the station all the members of Noble were now inside the door's radius. Plasma bolts continued to whiz into the chamber lighting up the empty room but the team continued to hold them off. Then with a metallic thud and heavy click the thick blast door closed and locked. The team breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"That should hold them awhile," Kat commented, taking off her helmet and running her hand through her crew cut hair.

"Ya think?" Emile responded. "Define a while."

Kat snorted but didn't reply to the wry comment. Instead she walked over to Mike. "Good to see you made it through Six considering the extra baggage you had to carry." She placed her hand affectionately on his shoulder and left it there.

Natalia's anger flared at the derogatory comment aimed at her but even more at the hand which lingered on his shoulder.

"We need to find the control room," Commander Carter declared, ending the brief moment of respite. "From there, Kat can get the relay back online. Jun, post here. If we flush any hostiles, they're yours. All right, let's do this."

With Emile in the lead they moved from the receiving bay towards the inner part of the base. Though the lights were down the electrical system wasn't totally fried since the interior blast door opened with a soft thrum when they approached it. Moving through and entering another room these too were off.

"Can't see a thing," Carter stated with an edge of frustration. Then to Mike who'd moved up to take point with Emile he ordered, "Noble Six, turn on your night vision."

There were no sounds and nothing came up on the HUD but still the team moved cautiously through the dark corridor until they approached another room this time dimly lit by a series of emergency lights.

"Control room," Kat identified. Go easy."

Noble moved carefully into the room. Prominent in the centre was a dead civilian dressed like a scientist lying face down in a pool of blood. While the rest of the fanned out to search the control room Emile continued on scouting the area just beyond.

Kat moved through to examine the control panel as the rest of the team spread out. Passing by she asked Mike, "Noble Six, search that body." Moving to the control panel she could see the Covenant had already been in the room. "Damn, plasma damage," she said to herself over the open channel.

As Mike carefully rolled the body over, searching for booby traps, the rest of Noble fanned out and searched the area. Natalia was left to stand by herself in the middle of the room, unsure what to do.

Commander Carter found a wounded soldier hiding in a dark alcove of the control room. "Where's the rest of your unit?" he asked, glancing around the rest of the room since something didn't feel right.

"We got split," the injured soldier responded weakly. "I don't think they... It sounded bad on the comms."

"All right, corporal, stay put. We'll get you a combat surgeon," Carter said, patting the man on the shoulder.

Mike was about to roll the dead body back down when a small data module popped out of one of the victims lab coat pockets. Taking a quick look he called out, "Found something."

Kat moved swiftly from her position examining the control panel and snatched the data module out of Mike's hand. "I'll take that, Six. Not your domain."

Mike was irritated by her presumption but before he could reply Jorge called out from another part of the room.

"I've got a live one over here," the big Spartan II announced rhetorically as the sound of a yelling female could be heard. "Come on, out you come."

Jorge tried to pick up a petite, dark-haired female, but she continued to hit him unafraid while yelling at him in what seemed to be Hungarian.

"It's all right, we're not going to hurt you," Jorge said to the young woman soothingly.

"Jorge...", an irritated Carter began.

"I've got her," he responded. Putting his heavy machine gun down he grabbed her softly. "Keep still and I'll release you."

The girl visibly calmed but continued to yell urgently in Hungarian pointing frantically around the room.

Signaling what the young woman had been gesturing about, an Elite Field Marshal jumped out of a hiding place with a roar brandishing an Energy Swords. With a vicious swing it sought to cut off Jorge's

head. The Spartan II nimbly ducked down covering the cowering the woman and avoided the attack.

The Marshal growled a challenge to the rest of Noble Team while two more Zealots in burnished armor popped out of their hiding place. Seeing Natalia standing stunned at the unexpected event with her weapon down the Marshal charged at her with a ferocious roar. Kat moved with quick reflexes from her position to disrupt the charge and saved a frozen Natalia. But that left the Spartan open to the vicious Energy Sword. The Marshal nearly cut Kat down but Commander Carter pushed her out of the way. Mike snapped up his assault rifle and laid a stream of automatic fire onto the Elite which the others from Noble joined in.

The Marshal's energy shield drained so rather than stay it charged out of the room, knocking Mike over like a bowling pin as it ran out the door.

"Bad guy coming out!" Carter called out to Emile.

Seeing an opportunity another of the Zealots jumped on Mike. Grabbing him by the neck the Elite stabbed viciously with an energy dagger. Mike was quicker. Deflecting the dagger strike he countered with a punch into the center of the Elite's four hinged mandible mouth stunning the attacker for a moment. Outrage registered on its face as it roared in defiance at the Spartan. Its mandibles opening in anger the Zealot tried to stab again but by then Commander Carter had moved over to support and kicked the heavy Elite off of Mike. As the Elite tumbled to the floor Kat opened up with a long burst of automatic rifle fire draining its energy shield. Instead of staying to fight the two Elites began to back out of the room allowing Carter to kick Mike's assault rifle to him. The Spartan, along with the others, moved to cut the Elite's down but they grabbed the now shouting wounded UNSC soldier and used him as a shield. Between the shout of the frightened soldier and the screams of the civilian girl all was bedlam in the control room. Clear of the room the Zealots retreat as Noble holds it fire.

"That tango blew past me. Permission to pursue?" Emile asked in anticipation.

"Negative Four, stay on the entrance," Carter ordered. "Two, handle her. Five and Six, clear the hole."

Mike slapped a fresh mag into his MA37 then joined Jorge in the entrance to the room the two Elites had moved towards. He saw the crumpled body of the now dead soldier the Covenant had killed after using him as a shield. His anger burned at the wanton act of murder. "Let's go Five. I don't want them to get away," Mike called out tensely as Jorge sealed the interior blast door shut behind them. Then, in the darkened room, the two Spartans prepared for payback.

While Noble Five and Six went on the hunt the remainder of Noble Team and Natalia had the chance to catch their breath and assess the situation.

"What the heck were those hingeheads doing hiding in here?" Jun wondered. "That's not their style."

"Yea man, those were Zealots too. They don't retreat," Emile agreed.
"Weird."

Rather than join in the conversation Kat instead charged over to where a still stunned Natalia stood alone. Ripping off her helmet she spit on the floor. "Listen you spoiled little rich kid," she spat out, "either do something or get out of the way before you get us killed."

"Come on Kat, we need that relay up and running," Carter intervened attempting to defuse the situation but also not contradicting the statement.

Kat glared at Natalia but said nothing more. In truth nothing further needed to be said. The divide had been increased. Kat Jammed her helmet on then went back to working on the control panel.

While the rest of Noble Team went about securing the room Natalia was left alone with her thoughts. Angry and embarrassed at being called out by Kat she also found herself concerned about Mike and what was happening with him. She snorted to herself at the thought. After seeing the man in action it was obvious he could look after herself. In contrast, she should be worried about her own safety since she still couldn't do any more than shadow Noble Six. Yet she still worried, it was a curious, new sensation for her.

In reality, she was right to worry. Mike and Jorge moved cautiously forward, searching out the two Elites. Trying to draw them out Jorge threw a flare to the other side of the room which turned out to be a storage bay. One of the Zealots responded by stepping out from behind a crate and firing a Concussion Rifle. Mike and Jorge barely got out of the way as the massive energy bolt slammed into the wall near them. In concert, a large number of Grunts and Jackals emerged to engage the two Spartans. The Noble Team members responded with automatic weapon fire and grenades. The tight quarters actually worked against the Covenant ambush since there were too many of them to not bump into each other whereas the humans worked together to systematically clear the room. As the minions were eliminated the two elusive Elites they were pursuing slipped out and down a nearby corridor.

Probing forward the Spartans were met with more Grunts blocking their path but by this point Mike and Jorge were working together like a well-oiled machine. Now an unstoppable juggernaut they cleared the path until only the retreating Sangheili remained. Mike led with a pair of grenades in quick succession, catching the Elites off guard. Draining their shields and though the Elite warriors roared in defiance it became their death song as the Lone Wolf cut down one with his MA37 and Jorge the other. Then, the room went silent. Nothing showed on their motion trackers but the pair did a thorough sweep of the area to ensure no cloaked Covenant remained.

Satisfied, Jorge removed his helmet and breathed a sigh of relief. Patting Mike on the shoulder he said, "Nicely done Mike."

"Thanks," the now accepted Noble Six replied, feeling a strange sense of joy at the simple compliment. It had been a long time since the opinion of anyone mattered to him.

"Noble Five reporting," Jorge called in on the team net. "Contacts

neutralized."

"Kat needs you to reset a junction," Commander Carter responded to the report. "Do it and get back up here."

"No rest for the wicked, eh?" Jorge deadpanned to Mike.

Together they found the junction and Mike used some of the electronics skills he'd learned on a previous mission a few years past to reset it. Satisfied, the pair moved back to the control room to rejoin the team. Jun nodded his head in acknowledgement when the pair re-entered and Natalia, helmet off, took a couple of steps towards the pair before checking herself. She then stood staring at them, her deep emerald eyes showing a flash of emotion before settling down. Jorge looked at Mike and shrugged in confusion. For his part, Mike had a strange sensation in response to the intense woman's gaze. They found Kat was poking around inside a panel that had been removed and an increasingly tense Commander Carter was hovering over her.

"How long?" Carter asked Noble Two.

"Question of my life," Kat responded a bit sarcastically but not looking up from her work. "If the question is when will this station be back online, two weeks, earliest. This is plasma damage. All major uplink components are fried."

"Two minutes is too long," the leader of Noble team replied tensely.

"Which is why I'm splicing into the main overland bundle to get you a direct line to Colonel Holland... you're in my light, Commander," Kat said, signaling she didn't need his questions or help.

In frustration Carter turned to Jorge. "Find out what she knows," he ordered, referring to the civilian female who sat in a corner clutching her knees.

Jorge tried to connect with the young girl but she shoved his hand away. Finally he removed his helmet and began to talk to her in his native Hungarian. That seemed to do the trick. The girl snapped out of her shock. Sullenly she gave her name as Sara.

Jorge looked over at the body of the middle-aged scientist still lying on the floor. "Friend of yours?" he asked.

"Father," Sara responded dejectedly.

"Sajnálom," Jorge said genuinely in Hungarian. "I'm sorry."

"Why would you be?" Sara shot back bitterly.

"Big man forgets what he is sometimes," Emile said to Mike who was watching the interaction.

"She just lost her father," Jorge responded coldly to Emile. Then to Commander Carter he reported, "She needs a full psychiatric workup."

"She's not the only one," Emile interjected as Jorge glared at

him.

"Lock it down, both of you!" Noble One ordered, in no mood for the banter. "Get her on her feet... the body stays here."

"Thank you, sir," Jorge answered, nodding his head in appreciation. He then walked by Emile bumping him slightly and glaring at the sarcastic Spartan. Moving to Sāira he helped the traumatized girl get on her feet.

Natalia had stood off to the side, not involving herself and not being asked to participate. Neutral at best but after her exchange with Kat that was okay. The spontaneous woman had instinctively moved to hug Mike when he and Jorge had returned safely but then checked herself. What must he be thinking about her, she chided herself. She continued to act like a school girl which made her angry. Yet she continued to be in over her head and continued to be drawn to Mike leaving her emotions vulnerable.

"Signal. It's patchy, but it's there," Kat reported triumphantly.

"I'll take it," Carter answered, happy to finally be doing something.

"Best not touch anything," Kat cautioned. "You wouldn't want to ground this place."

While the rest of the team left the room to give their commander some privacy, Carter reported in on the direct patch to Noble Actual, Colonel Holland.

"... I'm barely getting you. What's your situation, over?" the overseer of Noble Team asked tensely.

"Colonel, this is Noble One. There are no rebels. The Covenant are on Reach. Acknowledge?"

"Come again, Noble One?" Colonel Holland asked incredulously. "Did you say Covenant?"

"Affirmative," Carter confirmed. "It's the WINTER CONTINGENCY."

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

1128 hrs, July 26, 2552, on route to Sword Base, Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Eposz, Planet Reach

Winter Contingency- the UNSC's doomsday planned contingency for if the Covenant ever found a major human planet such as Reach. It was a theory that chilled the bones of the strategists and now had become a reality. The forces on the ground and in space around Reach adjusted to this numbing truth. As the UNSC rushed any available ship to the planet to defend this vital center they also tried to keep it quiet on Earth. The fear of panic was legitimate and there was an unrealistic expectation they could win this one. So the powers to be responded with force at Reach and suppression of information on

Earth.

The pressure of politics and the big-picture problem of the invasion were lost on Noble Team. Theirs was the micro world of fight and survive. Since the initial discovery two days earlier of the Covenant incursion they'd been fighting a series of delaying actions around key installations in the area in addition to supporting UNSC Army troops that had gotten themselves in trouble. There had been no lack of opportunity to keep busy so they had been moving and fighting virtually non-stop until Colonel Holland pulled them back to Buford Station for some much needed rest and rearming.

It was short lived.

A concerted attack by the Covenant on the main facility of Sword Base in another region, showing the invasion had expanded, sent them back into action after only a couple hours of down time.

Jorge looked out the open, sliding door of the utility helicopter and couldn't help sighing while absently cleaning his M247H HMG. Though he'd been away from Reach for years, had been taken forcefully from her, she was still home. His interactions with Sara, the young lady they'd saved at the relay station had disturbed him, bringing back unhappy memories. Yes, it was pleasant to talk in his native tongue and the time they'd spent together before she was handed over to a civilian aid station had been a welcome distraction but it also reminded him of all he'd missed over the course of his life. All he knew was killing, destruction, death—but always there was Reach, a haven of safe, happy memories for him. Now the war had come to his home and he feared for the future of it and the one thing that kept him from the fear of becoming a mindless killing machine.

While the big Spartan II mused, Natalia was so tired she could hardly keep her mind clear. The constant pressure of fight and move was wearing her down. Though in top shape, the woman knew she couldn't sustain this pace forever. The privileged woman marveled at the stamina of Mike and the other Spartans. They never seemed to tire. True, the elite troopers had been medically enhanced but there was something more to the members of Noble Team. Each had a dogged resilience, a drive to not give up that went far beyond what medical science had given them. It was this resolve, and not what had been injected into them, that made these Spartans true super soldiers. She'd always thought of the Spartans as being some sort of robots but now knew this to be a lie. Each had their own unique personalities and she suspected if she went deeper their own hopes and dreams.

Still, none of them could go on forever, least of them Natalia Misriah, but the necessities of defending Planet Reach took precedent over the personal needs of Noble Team.

Despite the increasing likelihood they were going to lose this fight Mike found himself at peace and even perhaps enjoying himself if he knew what that even meant anymore. He was serving with a top notch team. He'd found an old friend to be alive and was able to use his skills to help the group as a whole. The Lone Wolf seemed to be fading from view. Still, there was the tension of experience and history. Already there had been several of Commander Carter's decisions he would have done differently. Two days earlier he'd done things what he thought to be a better way and had been rebuked by

Noble One. That angered Mike and it took everything he had to not argue with the team leader. He also now had Lt. Comm. Misriah in tow with him constantly. He'd done his best to teach her how to fight but she was slowing him down. The others in Noble seemed to like it that way since they then didn't have to deal with the ONI officer who was clearly out of her element. As much as he resented it Mike had to admit that the blonde-haired woman had been learning quickly and had done okay. He shook his head, as if to clear his thoughts of the conflicting feelings rattling around inside him. There'd been no time to sort all this stuff out before they saw action and there promised little opportunity to do that now.

Now they found themselves flying over the Babd Catha Ice Shelf in Eposz. Sword Base, a critical ONI research facility in the region, was under heavy attack so Noble Team had been tasked to assist. Moving over the rugged terrain towards the coast area ice interspersed with the same soaring rock formations common to the area created a breathtaking sight that none took in due to the growing pressure of the coming mission. Patches of fog from the cold of the ice continued to hang on despite the sun of mid-day. It was going to be a typical hot day in July. Large ice bergs floated in the water dotting the still ocean providing a laneway for the two UH-144 Falcons Noble rode in to dance in and out of travelling to support the beleaguered garrison.

The team prepared to do what they could. A short distance from the base the team primed to move in.

"Be advised, kilo-three-three and kilo-three-four, your current LZ is too hot!" the Sword Base Command-and-Control Center reported, warning the inbound Falcons

"Roger that," Commander Carter acknowledged the not unexpected development. Dot, standby to receive and respond," the Noble Team leader contacted their dedicated Artificial Intelligence Asset.

"Yes, Commander... coordinates received," their AI responded in a pleasant female voice, "beginning to scan relevant data to provide an alternative solution."

Passing a large island and coming into view of the Sword Base area of operation the team were shocked to find a Covenant SDV-Class heavy corvette hovering just off from the base.

"Initiate immediate course correction. The Office of Naval Intelligence Sword Base is presently under siege from a corvette-class Covenant vessel," Aunt Dot reported redundantly. "Due to the sensitive nature of this facility, use of orbital rounds has been, for the moment, prohibited. Regrettably, my efforts to obtain relevant data on enemy forces have been unsuccessful. However, current defensive forces are insufficient. ONI has requested Team Noble's direct intervention to help secure Sword Base."

Commander Carter sighed heavily at the unexpected development. Nothing was ever easy for Noble Team. "Alright people," he signaled the others to pay attention, "we're stuck with that ship for the time being. Let's focus on the hostile infantry - give those troopers a hand," he decided.

As Covenant forces pressed in on the heavily engaged UNSC Army forces the Falcons looked for a place to land so Noble Team could get involved. Finding a spot Commander Carter ordered one of the Falcons to land. Hovering several feet above the large base the deployment began.

"Kat, Six, you're out here. Jorge, Emile, you're next, get prepped," Carter ordered.

"What about me, sir, I'll go with them," Natalia jumped in volunteering to stay with Mike.

"Negative. You'll stay with me and act in a support capacity," the Noble Team leader responded brusquely.

"Sorry sweetheart, maybe next time," Kat called out to Natalia. Then putting her hand on Mike's back she called out, "Let's move, lieutenant."

The Falcon hovered a few feet off the ground allowing Kat and Mike to jump off before rising up to drop the next group off.

"Kat, Six, push back the attack on Sword Base, find out what we're dealing with," Carter ordered them.

"Roger that, we're your strike team," Kat confirmed, giving Mike a thumb's up. The pair now became an independent fire team.

There was no time to think. The outer area of the base was completely overrun by all manner of the Covenant looking to overwhelm the garrison. Moving instinctively the pair of Spartans engaged the attackers beginning to sweep the area they'd landed in, seeking to secure a foothold.

"Spartans, hostiles north," they received word from Sword Control who had picked them up on their grid so began acting as a fire control point.

Seeing ground fire from an area above them Mike and Kat moved to link up with some of the beleaguered UNSC troops. Using the natural cover of the bases entry ramps they thinned out the opposition sweeping the area and giving the army soldiers some breathing room using a lethal combination of automatic weapon fire and grenades.

For their part the Covenant were smart enough to see the threat from the newly arrived Spartans so shifted their focus from the outmatched UNSC troopers to the super soldiers. That played into the Noble Team member's strength. Allowing their armor to absorb most of the blows but never getting so depleted to be at genuine risk, which allowed the other troops to concentrate their fire in support of the attacking Spartans. The combined firepower was sufficient to clear the area in a short period of time allowing the two Spartans a quick breather.

"Just like old times, eh Mike?" Kat called out with a whoop.

"Yea, except these aren't DI's with stun rounds," Mike shot back, sharing the exhilaration at surviving the odds yet again.

The years they'd been apart melted away as the two moved as one in a

dance of destruction, shifting, covering and always maintaining a steady rate of fire that mowed the Covenant down before them like spring grass.

There were so many targets lit up on the IFF that the Spartans instead went on instinct, bobbing and weaving their way through the outer area of the structure eliminating all resistance along the way.

Moving up and over, with the help of the base defense forces the two Spartans were able to clear a courtyard and then moved down an adjacent ramp to another level. Not pausing to rest, instead they gathered ammo from fallen soldiers and reloaded on the run not allowing the staggered Covenant attackers to regroup.

Whoever was organizing the enemy troops threw in a group of plumed Kig-Yar Skirmishers to try to slow the Spartans down but Mike in particular was a juggernaut, bowling through them. Finally, the backbone of the Covenant attack broken they secured the whole area.

"Noble Two to Sword Control: courtyard is clear, over," Kat reported as Mike looked around for any enemy who had hidden themselves.

"Head to the main gate to the east, I'll brief you as you go," Sword Control requested.

Ensuring the remaining UNSC troops they'd fought with were in a good defensive position to two Spartans moved through another major gate to the sprawling base picking up supplies along the way including a Targeting Indicator.

"What do you think?" Mike asked ask of the laser designator.

Kat shrugged. "Who knows, might be of use. Remember that one mission back at Curaheeâ€¦," she began.

"Yes I do," Mike responded with a snort but we don't have time for that." He stored the electronic device in his kit bag and they moved out to their next objective, thinking with amusement for a moment about the incident from their youthful training Kat had alluded to.

Travelling outside the walls of the base the strike team attempted to extend the perimeter to give the beleaguered troops guarding it a bit of a buffer zone. Moving away from cover though brought them into the line of fire of Covenant armor.

Attempting to assist a harried Warthog vehicle Kat and Mike found themselves tangling with a pair of Wraith tanks. After dodging and trading fire they found a use for the targeting indicator they'd picked up earlier. Using it to lase in on the mortar-carrying Wraiths one at a time they called in artillery strikes which disabled the Covenant armored thrust. Without the firepower their ground forces became easy prey for the Spartans backed up by UNSC troops. Again, they swept the area clear of attackers.

A high pitched whine overhead got their attention as an inbound Pelican dropped off a Warthog Force Application Vehicle in a cloud of swirling dust.

"Hey Mike, you get the idea we're about to go for a drive?" Kat deadpanned.

He only shook his head. It was just another day for a Spartan.

While Mike and Kat were facing their own struggles to control Sword Base the rest of Noble Team were inserted to begin the defense of the key military structure. Natalia and Commander Carter were last to go. Their Pelican dropped them in a courtyard near what appeared to be the main entrance to the central administrative building.

Carter looked around to get the lay of the land. Apparently seeing what he was looking for he turned to Natalia. "Okay, you enter here and report to Sword Control. I want you monitoring comms and supporting them as needed. Our fallback point if necessary is here so you need to assist in holding this position. Got it?"

"Got it sir," Natalia replied without emotion. Oh, she got it all right. The commander of Noble Team didn't want her in the way so stuck her in the center of the bases Command-and-Control structure where she wouldn't get into trouble. Great, so much for proving her worth.

Commander Carter didn't stick around long enough to catch the dissatisfaction. He sprinted away towards the sound of intensifying combat leaving Natalia alone. For a moment she thought of defying his order and going to the fight. It wouldn't be hard to find, it was all around them and truly there was no 'safe' place on the base. In the end, fear of the unknown and fear of defying an order caused her to move like a robot into the command bunker. The steel door shot open with a hiss and she walked in, her eyes adjusting to the dull light. There were a half "dozen soldiers huddled over monitors and in communication with the defense forces. A harried looking lieutenant seemed startled when she entered into the room. "Can I help you ma'am?" he asked quickly.

"I've been tasked to provide liaison support for Noble Team," she replied, knowing how lame it sounded even to her.

The dark haired junior officer, likely around Natalia's age gave her a strange look but didn't comment. "Well, okay. You can plug into that terminal over there," he pointed to an unoccupied work station. "I can't do much more than that. Sorry, we're pretty busy." With that he ignored her too and went back to the more important work of trying to defend the base.

For the next two hours she listened to the radio chatter and watched in rapt fascination the feeds from various video monitors around the base.

"3 Echo 21 requesting support on east perimeter, Covenant forces are too strong."

"3 Echo 34 needs immediate support. We have Covenant armor crawling all over us."

"This is Sword Control to 3 Echo 17, you are ordered to abandon the outer rim and fall back to secondary position Lima, acknowledge."

"3 Echo 57 come in, this is Sword Control. 57 acknowledge over. Any station- do you have contact with 3 Echo 57?"

57's gone! We got to bug out!"

"Hold your positions. We have Spartans inbound to assist."

It went on and on like that and little of the news was good. On occasion she would hear Noble Team on the general base channel since they'd plugged in on that grid.

"Noble 4, you need to reposition to higher ground covering north. Seek out targets of priority."

Noble 3, you and 5, reinforce the north approach. Base defenses are collapsing and we need to hold that area."

But of growing interest were the transmissions pertaining to Mike and Kat. As they were sent away from the core of the base she had a combination of admiration for what they were doing, growing fear of something happening to Mike and an even stronger jealousy of Kat for being there with him. She became particularly nervous when the pair was sent alone outside the base lines to reactivate an off-line AA battery needed for support. Her heart soared though when the report came in of their successful completion. When she cheered several of the other operators stopped to look at her.

Still, despite their successes, things were going poorly and the base's defenses were beginning to collapse. The Covenant corvette hanging above like a sword of Damocles had begun ground bombardment, though as of yet for some reason they hadn't begun glassing the area. Still, they wouldn't need it to destroy the base.

Thus far the battle had been largely an academic exercise for Natalia until she heard the officer directing the forces contact Mike and Kat: "Noble Strike, this is Sword Control, the old Farragut Station has its own comms array that we should bring back online with command. Airview Base has an anti-air battery that will help clear the skies."

She had to force herself to breath. Both locations were well outside the base's shrinking defensive perimeter so were crawling with Covenant. Kat's reply did nothing to help her condition.

"Roger that. AA gun is to the west, comms array to the east. We're on it and will get them back online." Natalia heard Kat's closing remark to Mike on the open channel: Let's roll."

One such mission was deadly, two were impossible. It was a suicide mission.

Back just outside the base Kat gave Mike a sly grin. "What do you think?" The woman was having the time of her life.

"AA gun is going to do this base a lot more good right now then a sitrep to headquarters," Mike responded with a shrug.

"I agree, go for the gun," Kat affirmed. I'll drive," she declared giving him a wink.

Mike shook his head and laughed despite all the destruction around them. Same old Kat. He hopped up into the rear settling behind the M41 Vulcan Light Anti-Aircraft Gun. Pulling back the cocking handle he heard the comforting _thunk_ of a 99mm round settling into the chamber. They were ready to rock and roll.

"Can I come along too, Lieutenant Commander?"

Kat and Mike looked to see a young soldier with the name of LADD sewn on his uniform standing at the side of the Warthog with a look of anticipation.

"You got any ammo for that DMR?" Kat asked.

"Yes ma'am, a full complement," the soldier responded instantly.

"Hop aboard," Kat invited him with a jerk of her thumb. Plunking her helmet down on her head she called out: "Hang on, this is going to be a rough ride."

The feisty Spartan didn't need to be a prophet to know the truth of her statement. Less than a half kilometer west of the base they came under fire from a variety of Covenant positions. Kat kept the accelerator down the whole time bumping and swaying. The 12 liter liquid-cooled, hydrogen-injected engine roared in response but the three tonne Force Application Vehicle stayed on the ground flying to their objective.

"I'm picking up a power source, we're close to the AA gun," Kat called out.

"Contacts!" Trooper Ladd called out rhetorically.

The installation swarmed with Covenant. Squat, waddling Grunts, shady Jackals and at least a section of armored Elites held the location and didn't look ready to be dislodged. Mike opened up with the M41 LAAG spitting out a flame of 12.7 x 99mm slugs. At a rate of 500 rounds per minute the Vulcan roared in response cutting a swath wherever Mike pointed it. Kat zigzagged back and forth around the station while Mike swiveled back and forth systematically thinning out resistance. Several nimble Ghost single-seat Rapid Attack Vehicles tried to stop them but the armor-piercing rounds from the LAAG shredded them in short order.

Satisfied they'd made their presence felt, Kat brought the Warthog to a grinding halt and they bailed out. The UNSC forces would need to do the rest on foot.

"That's the gun over there. Should be a reset control somewhere, get it online," Kat gestured to Mike. "Ladd and I will hold the fort while you fire it up."

Providing covering fire against the regrouping Covenant forces that had been scattered during the initial assault Mike sprinted to the Fire Control Centre for the AA battery that sat idle on the plain. Several Grunts were hiding inside so Mike dispatched them easily despite their attempt to slow him down with plasma bolts and Needler rounds. Charging up the stairs he ran smack into an Elite who was trying to snipe at Kat and Trooper Ladd. With no time to fire Mike

charged into him and beat the roaring Sangheili with the butt end of his MA37. Three savage blows took the Elite's shield down and another two right in the mandibles stove in its head like a keg.

The top of the platform was clear.

Moving to the corner of the roof he found the anti-aircraft battery's reset control and activated it. Mike was rewarded with the staccato sound of the AA gun immediately opening fire on the dancing Banshees and Covenant dropships around the Corvette.

"That did it, Six. AA gun is online," an elated Kat called out.

"Nice work, Spartans," Sword Control cut in, still monitoring from the base. "Get to Farragut Station and get that comms array up and running."

In the C-and-C bunker Natalia was both shocked and elated. While the efforts of Emile, Jun and Jorge had also been impressive none had accomplished what Mike and Kat did who were now being asked to do the impossible again. She'd prayed they would be recalled to the base but instead their reward was to be sent on an end-around to the other side of the facility to reset a communications relay. Like good soldiers the pair never questioned the order. _But then that's what they've been conditioned for virtually their whole lives,_ Natalia thought to herself. _Not just conditioned but created_. A shiver went up her spine at the thought of the procedure to make a Spartan. She'd read about the classified process as part of her job with ONI. It horrified her. As much as she admired the Spartans now seeing the human side of the 'super soldiers' she also couldn't help but see the injustice of what had been done to them. Taken as children, trained harder than the elite ODSs and medically altered, their lives had been stolen from them. Natalia then recalled conversations she'd been involved with in the past year with her father and MacKenzie; how they'd talked with such cold calculation about 'assets' and 'cost return'. She'd nodded her head in agreement not really caring rather than screaming that these were people and not tools. But she'd been silent, as she'd always been on issues that didn't impact her own ambition or comfort.

More reports poured in over the communications network of the increasingly desperate struggle. The Spartans seemed to be single-handedly holding onto the important installation.

A fresh wave of condemnation swept over the thoughtful woman as she realized she'd had the luxury of such musings all her life and again right now. While Mike and the other Spartans risked their lives to try to protect the base, she was in a position of relative safety yet again. The idea tasted like bile in her mouth. Something needed to change.

8. Chapter 8

****Chapter 8****

****1312 hrs, July 26, 2552, Sword Base, ****Babd Catha Ice Shelf, ****Eposz****, ****Planet Reach****

As Natalia mused Mike and Kat had a dilemma. The Warthog they'd traveled in had been too badly damaged to continue.

Better it then me, Mike thought to himself suddenly caring whether he lived or died for some reason. He'd not had anything to live for other than killing Covenant for years. And now? What was it?

"So what are we going to do? Hitchhike?" a voice cut into his musings.

Kat interrupted Mike's thoughts with the reality of their situation. "I don't know," he confessed a bit absently.

Sword Control had them covered. A Pelican swooped in from the base with another Warthog hanging from its belly since the air corridor in that sector was clear of Covenant air assets due to the deadly precision of the fully operational AA gun. Hovering over the ground the Pelican dropped its cargo which landed with a heavy _thud_ bouncing freely on its suspension.

It was a M12 Gauss Warthog.

"Spartans, this is Sword Control. Thought you could use some mobile firepower," Sword Control reported to them.

"How thoughtful. And it's just my size," Kat commented wryly. "Let's roll or we'll miss afternoon tea."

Once again Trooper Ladd, who had miraculously survived the assault on the AA battery, took the passenger seat while Mike jumped into the back cocking the M68 ALIM Gauss Cannon.

Dirt flying, Kat punched the accelerator of the Gauss Hog and they jumped into motion. Heading now to the east the communications relay popped up as a waypoint on their HUD's. Again, resistance popped up along the way. Explosions churning up the turf, Mike opened a path with strategically placed 130mm rounds from the auto-feeding cannon while Ladd used his DMR to take care of other targets of opportunity.

Arriving at the station the group found the outer lying single story buildings and courtyard occupied by Covenant. The humans used the same tactic as before. Kat swept back and forth around the station in a crazy pattern of trying to give her passengers shots while not getting blown up. In shorter order than expected they cleared resistance that seemed to melt into the surroundings.

Coming to a halt a short distance from the simple concrete building Kat hopped out. "Hope that comms array has a working generator."

Mike jumped out leveling his assault rifle sweeping back and forth. Something didn't feel right, the hair on the back of his neck stood up.

Ladd got halfway out of the passenger seat when a hissing flash of light from the building connected with his head causing it to erupt in a spray of red mist.

"Ambush!" Kat called out the warning too late.

Mike turned in the direction of the shot spotting a Jackal wielding a deadly Particle Beam Rifle. Another beam of ionized hydrogen gas cut through the afternoon sky in his direction. Rolling out of the way the Spartan came to a knell and let rip a burst from his MA37. Though not able to penetrate the sniper's energy shield it did cause the avian creature to displace.

The ground erupted beside him as a plasma round exploded, throwing him hard into the chassis of the Gauss Hog draining his shield.

"Mike!" Kat called out urgently. Running to his side she saw her friend was okay. This time she had no wise cracks. "We've got a Revenant inbound. We got to take it out Six."

Shaking his head to try to get rid of the ringing in it, Mike climbed back into the Gauss Hog's turret while Kat fired up the engine. Another plasma round from the light mobile artillery vehicle hissed through the air landing exactly where the human transport had been ten seconds earlier.

Kat gunned the engine of the Warthog, juking wildly to keep out of the trace of fire from the Revenant which gave chase attempting to drop deadly plasma fire on top of them. The Covenant gunner was good, keeping them defensive by bracketing fire. The earth shook around them and shards of razor sharp rock flew through the air. Mike tried several times but had no shot, barely able to keep from being bounced out the back of the bouncing Hog. Kat did everything she could to break free but the nimble Covenant vehicle matched her moves. Mike got hit by a splash of plasma from a near miss, draining his shield. Fortunately nothing else hit him allowing it to regenerate.

"Hold on Mike, I'm going to try something a bit crazy," Kat called out, desperate to turn the tables.

"What do you call this?" he yelled back.

Kat picked up speed heading directly for a group of rocks jutting out of the ground. With a whoop she yanked the wheel at the last second to ensure they hit the outcrop on the side rather than trying to avoid it. The Warthog leapt into the air wildly careening precariously on its side. The Revenant driver hadn't expected the crazy tactic so pulled up too late, slamming into the rock formation and stopping its forward progress. The Warthog though landed with a bounce on a 90 degree angle from its previous position, presenting Mike with a clear line of sight on the momentarily stopped artillery platform.

"Take the shot!" Kat screamed.

Boom Boom Boom

In rapid succession Mike pumped three 130mm rounds into the Revenant. All three struck and the Covenant armored vehicle erupted with a satisfying explosion.

With the Revenant out of the way it was easy to mop up the remainder of the Covenant forces. Leaving the Gauss Hog Mike and Kat moved fluidly together entering the buildings of the station until they

first found the generator switch. Then pushing aside token resistance the Spartans found the communications array on the roof of an adjacent building and activated it.

"Sword Control this is Spartan Strike," Mike called in. "Comms array is back online. Awaiting further instructions."

Just like that, the impossible had become not only possible but had happened. It was just another day for the Spartans.

Natalia had listened to the radio chatter between Mike and Kat on the team channel. Her heart soared with every moment they not only stayed alive but survived. First the AA gun was brought back up, clearing the skies, and then the comms array had been rebooted. The impossible had happened. The two Spartans had not only stayed alive but succeeded against the insurmountable odds. Her admiration for the two grew with each second and the pride of being part of Noble Team grew with it. But then, once again, reality crashed in. She wasn't part of Noble Team. She was an adjunct, a hitchhiker. Worse still, she felt the quiet voice inside condemning her: *_freeloader, vampire_*. you suck the life out of him and give nothing in return_

_ "_NO!"

Natalia's shout caused several of the operators to look around and one even drew her sidearm before realizing there was no threat, just an unenhanced ONI officer in MJOLINIR armor she didn't deserve. But then everyone knew ONI had its own rules, as did Spanner Misriah.

Finally, Natalia heard the word she'd wanted: "Good work, Spartans. Return to Sword Base, the rest of your team is inbound, imminent."

Their mission accomplished, Mike and Kat were being brought back to the others, as safe as that was right now.

Commander Carter responded to Sword Control's request. "Noble, be advised: Covenant Corvette moving into position. Kat, Six, get here quick. We need you inside."

The elation was short lived.

The sound of small arms fire and several explosions from outside caused everyone to pause from what they were doing and look towards the sound in anxiety. A bleeding corporal burst through the door. "We're being overrun. We can't hold this area any longer. We got hingeheads breathing down our throats. You have to retreat to a new position!"

"All right people," the lieutenant ordered. "We're going to relocate to our secondary position in ONI headquarters. Do a quick data dump and then move. You have one minute." Looking at Natalia, he said simply, "You're welcome to come with us ma'am or link back up with your team. Your call."

With that the officer flipped open a clear panel with a red button and hit it to begin a countdown to destroy the communications center. "Everyone out. She's going to blow in three minutes. Move!"

Not knowing what else to do or even where to go, Natalia blindly followed the others and hoped she'd find someone she knew.

Unaware of the crumbling defenses at Sword Base Mike knelt down in no-man's land beside Trooper Ladd and checked for vitals.

"Come on Mike, he's wasted. Let's go," Kat called from the driver's seat of the Gauss Hog, revving the engine for emphasis.

The Lone Wolf didn't care. The young UNSC soldier deserved better. It was obvious he was dead but Mike made sure. Grabbing the young man's dog tags he jumped back behind the gun.

Kat floored the vehicle to return to base. Speeding along a natural trail between rock faces they made good time back to the main gate of the base. There were more Covenant forces swarming the area including several more Revenants but the two Spartans didn't allow them to slow them down. Brushing aside the opposition they parked the Gauss Hog beside the entry keypad.

"We're stalled in the tower atrium, Kat. Where are you?" Jun called out over the team channel. The sound of small arms fire and explosions filled the open mic.

"Opening the gate now!" Kat deftly punched in the entry code and the door slid open. The pair sprinted in then closed it behind them, ensuring no attackers could follow.

It didn't matter, the Covenant were already swarming over the inner parts of the base courtyard. Fortunately the mixed group of Grunts and Jackals were more concerned with the UNSC soldiers they had pinned down in the entrance to the atrium to notice the new arrivals. That gave Kat and Mike the opportunity they needed. Loading fresh mags the pair led with each tossing two grenades to signal their arrival then following with intense automatic fire from their assault rifles. They not only cut a path to the soldiers but also broke the stimulus for attack giving them a breather.

Reloading and gathering more grenades they saw their position couldn't hold so ordered the few soldiers left in the zone to fall back with them in their quest to connect with the rest of Noble Team. The group was surprised to find not only Covenant inside the structure coming towards them but also a pair of deadly Hunters. Truly the situation at Sword Base was falling apart. The corvette continued its salvos from above and more troops were dropping in. The Covenant seemed to desperately want the base for some reason.

The attacking enemy switched to a support role to allow the Hunters to do their damage. A unique gestalt of smaller creatures known as Lekgolo, Hunters are a colony of orange, worm-like creatures that group together to exponentially increase their intelligence, strength, and maneuverability. Clad in armor, carrying a heavy shield and firing a deadly incendiary Fuel Rod Gun the thirteen foot tall creatures were mini-tanks. Working in pairs they were the most formidable creature in the Covenant.

Mike and Kat fell back behind cover as one of the Hunters let rip a blast from their deadly assault cannon. Regrouping, Mike moved out of cover to draw fire while Kat sweep around the side. Another gel round made contact beside where Mike moved, the explosion knocking him off

his feet. Rolling in one motion the Spartan got up and fired a burst from his assault rifle to maintain focus. This allowed Kat to move in and stuff a grenade into the Hunter's exposed back. The grenade went off with a satisfying _thump_. Wriggling orange worms spilled out of the beast like entrails and it fell dead to the ground with a loud death scream. The Hunter's mate flew into an anguished frenzy forgoing its cannon in an attempt to bash Kat to death. Leaving Mike uncovered it was easy for the Spartan to move in and empty a full clip of ammo into the distracted beasts back. It too dropped dead to the ground.

With the Hunters down and the added firepower of the UNSC soldiers who rallied, the remaining opposition was swept aside. Continuing to charge further into the building their waypoint indicators took the Spartans to a bank of elevators.

"Let's get to the Atrium. We'll have to go through the elevator, Mike. Take it."

Mike hit the button for the main level and the door slid silently shut behind them and they were alone. With light muzak playing from the loudspeaker the scene was surreal, as if nothing was going on around them. Then a nearby explosion rocked the elevator causing its lights to flicker momentarily.

"Corvette's hitting this base hard," Emile called out to no one in particular over the comms.

"Where's our orbital support?" Kat called out in frustration. "Got to be four platforms that could take it out with a single MAC round."

The elevator slowed to a stop so the pair braced for whatever they would find. The door slid open silently and an artificial voice greeted them in what turned out to be a reception area of the ONI security office.

"WELCOME TO THE OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE. AN ONI REPRESENTATIVE WILL MEET YOU SHORTLY."

"I doubt that very much," Kat retorted.

The automated PA system responded after doing whatever scan it had been programmed for. "THANK YOU, LIEUTENANT. YOU HAVE BEEN CLEARED FOR ACCESS."

The sound of an intense firefight nearby drove the two to push their pace instinctively knowing their teammates were nearby.

Earlier, moving outside of the Communications Center Natalia got the first sense of how bad things really were. The sound of human and Covenant weapons fire intermingled creating a din of noise. Chaotic running skirmishes were taking place as each side tried to gain the upper hand. For the invaders, it was only a matter of time since the base defenses had been breached. Unsure what to do Natalia followed the UNSC soldiers who were running as fast as they could and not concerning themselves with the firefights going on around them.

"Where to Sarge?" one pimply-faced trooper called to his leader in

fear.

"ONI HQ. That's where we make our stand. Don't worry son, there's Spartans there," the middle-aged NCO responded not breaking stride.

Spartans, Natalia thought, noting also the confidence that statement exuded. _That's where I want to be._

Arriving a short time later the senior NCO punched in a sequence on a keypad and the two story blast door raised up with a metallic whine. Once inside the Sergeant pointed to four troopers. "All right, you hang tight here. I'll find some help for you. Nothing that's not human gets past you, got it? Rest of you, with me, a new command center is being set up off the Atrium."

A few minutes and one elevator ride later the refugees from the captured Communications Center checked in with the remaining senior officers. Natalia saw Commander Carter conferring with an UNSC Army major so went over to report.

"Ms. Misriah, what are you doing here?" Noble Team's leader asked in surprise, as if he'd forgotten her.

"Communications Center was overrun sir, we had to fall back to a new location," Natalia answered, no longer hurt by the Spartan's indifference. She now knew it was not about her, the leader had bigger things on his mind.

"Okay, well I'm glad you're okay. Hang tight here and provide support," Carter ordered then concentrated on his comm link. Jun, find a good spot with cover. I want you to be able to cover this whole Atrium area."

"Roger that."

"Emile, I want you to get high and see what can be done about that corvette. Also, make sure nothing comes down on top of us."

"I'm on it boss," Noble Four responded over the radio.

A dull explosion could be felt and heard coming from a lower level of the building.

"Blast doors been forced open, the building is breeched," a junior officer reported panicky.

"Jorge, you're with me," Carter responded instantly. "We're going to hold this area."

"Right then, I'm with you," Jorge acknowledged, racking an armor-piercing shell into his heavy machine gun.

Natalia realized she'd be providing support sooner than expected as the sound of small arms fire moved steadily towards them. Ensuring she had a fresh magazine in her assault rifle, she checked to make sure the safety was off, took a deep breath and prepared to do what she was capable of. The fear of her own death had disappeared at some point in the day, she didn't know when or how, but now a deeper, greater fear took over but this was one that motivated her rather

than causing her to fall into gridlock- a fear of letting down those around her who were preparing to make a desperate last stand.

"Boss," Emile cut in urgently, Dropship is inserting troops from above. Can't hold 'em. They'll be coming down on your heads an moment!"

Almost in the same breath another voice from below added to the anxiety, "We got Hunters in the lower levelâ€|.can't stop them, they're moving up."

Carter swore and was about to give an order when a swarm of Covenant charged into the Atrium from a side area. Led by a pair of screaming suicide-Grunts who charged towards a group of soldiers they detonated themselves throwing bodies and parts in the air. The fall back point had already been compromised. Jackals appeared on an upper level balcony and began to fire down with Plasma Rifles. Colorful plasma bolts and Needler rounds filled the air while the human forces responded with a hail of lead. All around was chaos as the soldiers and Spartans did the best they could to establish control over the building.

Natalia saw an Elite with Energy Sword activated come out from behind a pack of Grunts and move towards the room where the command echelon had been placed for their protection. Their security detail was already down or engaged so the Zealot had a free run. She was in a good position, behind cover, and safe. She saw the scene unfold, knew no one else could do anything so got up and sprinted across the room. Several Needler rounds hit her but her armor absorbed the bursting charges. Moving swiftly she came up on the flank of the Elite. Dropping to one knee she opened fire with a burst from her Assault Rifle. Caught unaware the hulking Sangheili's armor drained before it knew it. Turning with a roar towards its attacker Natalia adjusted fire and walked a steady stream of high velocity rounds from its chest right into its gaping maw. The Elite crumpled to the ground. Not having time to enjoy her moment of victory the exposed woman was subjected to fire from above. Rolling out of the way she found cover and began to systematically return fire. Natalia realized how calm she finally was despite the fact every human in the room was dreading the arrival of the heavily armored hulking Hunters. All the lessons Mike had taught her the last few days were coming together. Despite the growing desperation of the fight she felt an elation she'd never experienced her whole life and giving an unexpected peace.

The interior blast door opened up and out from the area down below. Several turned in anticipation of the arrival of the Hunters who would signal the end of their desperate stand. Instead, charging out guns blazing to join the fight were Noble Two and Noble Six.

Mike and Kat had pushed aside the token resistance from the receiving area towards the interior blast door which opened to the Atrium area. They could tell by the radio traffic the fallback point had already been compromised so kept pressing up and through.

Entering in, the scene was chaotic with Spartans and UNSC soldiers intermingled with all form of Covenant. Mike looked for targets of opportunity, quickly assessing the situation with his seasoned eye. Then he saw Natalia. The ONI officer sprinted from good cover to engage a burnished red armor clad Elite dropping the imposing warrior

with a controlled burst of fire. He switched his focus to a lesser Elite trying to overwhelm a soldier protecting a Medic giving aid to some wounded soldiers. With precision he directed his fire to the Elites center of mass until its shield drained then placed a burst in the Sangheili's head. Slapping in a fresh magazine Mike moved further into the room and to his left, using the butt end of his rifle to drop the energy shield of a Jackal then with another to smash in its skull. While this was going on he could see Natalia coolly holding her position despite the risk of being flanked. The woman seemed to have no fear for her safety but instead was determined to anchor the defenses of an area where the human command party had holed up. The Spartan had to grudgingly admit the irritating woman was doing well. His reflections were interrupted by a fresh batch of Covenant surging down from the upper levels. It was obvious the entire structure was breached. Mike lobbed a grenade onto the platform the pack of invaders travelled and watched with satisfaction it go off shredding the mixed party and halting their advance. A chain reaction of explosions was set off when two Grunts had their methane tanks explode adding more confusion to the attackers. Mike then settled down to systematically eliminating the threat to this area of the building.

Natalia had held her position despite the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. Heart beating so hard she thought it would explode the woman tried to remember her training and more importantly what Mike had taught her. The fight seemed to be lulling in intensity and she wondered why. Then she saw Mike and Kat systematically moving through the room adding their firepower to the other Spartans and soldiers who now had the upper hand. She couldn't help but admire their precise movement and fearless efforts. Seeing that the command group now seemed to be safe and wanting to help the woman rediscovered her aggression and dashed across the open to engage a group of Grunts.

"Hey, watch yourself!" Kat yelled as Natalia crossed her line of fire.

Natalia skidded to a halt, rattled by the fact she'd missed the other Spartan lining up a shot. Suddenly unsure again, she stood in the open becoming an easy target for a Jackal marksman up above. Three shards from the creature's Needle Rifle connected draining her armor's shield. The alarm claxon sounded a warning shaking Natalia out of her indecision. She moved just as another three round burst of the crystalline shards hummed in towards her. The first one glanced off her armor but the impact exploded, ripping through the protective shoulder plate and searing her flesh. Natalia screamed in pain and surprise but reflexively kept moving so the other two rounds passed her by. The woman dove into cover, tears filling her eyes making it impossible for her to see. A sense of failure overwhelmed her and Natalia Misriah, who'd never failed at anything in her life, prepared to die feeling overwhelming futility.

9. Chapter 9

****Chapter 9****

****1357 hrs. July 26, 2552, Sword Base, ****Babd Catha Ice Shelf, ****Eposz****, ****Planet Reach****

The death stroke never came for Natalia Misriah, fate, or a higher force that had another purpose for her, intervened. A Jackal sniper prepping to finish the vulnerable woman off was instead hit by a stray plasma round from a retreating Grunt that went through the small opening in its shield taking its head off. Another pair of Jackals moving in for the easy kill were shredded from behind by Mike who then moved off and grappled with a roaring Elite. Natalia would live to fight another day.

It took less than ten more minutes for the UNSC forces to clear the Atrium area and re-establish some form of perimeter. Freed up soldiers and Marines poured in to shore up the defenses allowing those involved in the fight to have a bit of a breather.

Natalia winced as the pain from the Needler round lanced through her shoulder. She kicked herself for getting wounded in this way. She knew she shouldn't have exposed herself that way, nor let her shields get drained. In truth she was lucky it was only a glancing blow. The MJOLNIR armor had helped but a more direct shot would have likely killed her.

"Hey, rich girl," Kat yelled in frustration. "You cross my line again I'll shoot you myself. If you can't get with the program then do us all a favor and get out."

"Come on Kat, that's not fair," Mike interjected stepping in. "She's doing her best."

"Well it's not good enough," Spartan Two spat back. "Stop babying her and let her get in the fight." Shaking her head in disgust Kat slammed her helmet back onto her head and carried on with the mission.

Mike wasn't sure what to do. He did notice the damaged armor from the Needler round on Natalia's shoulder. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yea, I'm fine," Natalia lied. Tears welling up in her eyes from the pain of her wound and Kat's verbal assault.

"You're wounded. Here let me look at it," Mike said definitively. "We don't want this to get infected."

Natalia had no strength to argue or resist. She was finished. She'd done her best and failed. She'd let everyone down, especially Mike who'd given her a chance. The concern he was showing was all the more condemning.

Deftly removing the damaged shoulder plate Mike examined the wound with an expert eye. Taking a canister of Biofoam medical spray he treated the nasty burn.

"This should keep you until we get a chance to get you some proper first aid and have your armor repaired." Mike paused for a moment, as if weighing something. "Good job out there," he added quietly.

"Thanks," Natalia answered, embarrassed that he felt the need to try to encourage her.

"I mean it," the soft-spoken Spartan commented sincerely. "I watched

you take out that Elite going for the command group. That was good work. You're picking things up quickly." He let the words sink in then switched to mentor. "One thing though, when your shields drain and the alarm goes off, fall back and let it regenerate. Let the kit do the work it was designed for. You don't have to prove anything by rushing forward and making yourself vulnerable, okay?" Mike could see the look of appreciation in Natalia's face but also pain from more than her wound. "Don't let Kat get to you," he guessed correctly. "We're all pretty stressed right now. You're not slowing us down."

"Why are you doing this?" Natalia suddenly asked, all cool pretenses gone. Finally broken, the floodgate opened and tears began to stream down her attractive face.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked in genuine confusion.

"Why are you trying to help me? You know I'm no soldier and I sure as hell don't deserve to be with Noble Team," Natalia confessed, trying hard not to start sobbing but failing. "Why are you doing it?"

"Everyone deserves a second chance," Mike declared bluntly, removing his helmet so she could see the look of sincere concern on his hard face.

"Even spoiled little rich girls?" Natalia shot back bitterly.

"Especially spoiled little rich girls," Mike countered a twinkle lighting up his grey eyes which didn't seem so hard suddenly.

Natalia could see this was not empty platitute. He really meant it. "Why? I don't think I do."

"Legacy," Mike declared, voice dropping to barely a whisper.

"What do you mean?" Suddenly Natalia and Mike were the only two people on the planet and a war was not raging around them. The pain was gone not from the Biofoam taking effect but rather the captivating words she was hearing.

"Everyone deserves the right to be judged on their own merits and by what they do, not by their family's past," Mike stated with conviction. "I've seen you ask for help and seek to improve your skills. That counts more than results. Keep at it, the others will see it too."

"Thank you." Natalia could hardly breathe her head swimming at the genuineness of the comment from the hardened combat veteran, from the Lone Wolf. Reflexively, she put her hand on his arm and he didn't recoil. Instead he smiled slightly.

Another explosion not only rocked the building but broke the magic of the moment between the two. There was still a battle raging.

"Six, head upstairs and assist Emile," Carter ordered. "Jorge, make sure he gets there."

"Depend on it," Jorge acknowledged and moved out towards the ramp going to the upper levels.

"We'll cover you from down here. Misriah, you go with Six," Noble One ordered.

Putting his helmet back on Mike signaled their conversation was over. Nothing more needed to be said. "Come on Natalia, let's get back in the show," he declared. "By the way, I like the wasp tattoo on your shoulder."

Natalia. He'd called her Natalia. It was a start. She no longer cared that Commander Carter had sent her away. She was with him, with Mike. They were together again, a team. And he'd called her Natalia. That single sentence meant more to her than all the flowery words she'd heard from MacKenzie over the past year or the many others men had been telling her for years. He'd called her by her name. Her heart soared. He also liked her tattoo.

Stinger.

The word that shot into her mind as she followed Noble Six back into battle echoed condemnation. She'd wanted to 'sting' him like so many other men when they'd met but his armor was too thick. He wasn't interested and that made her want him more. Was this a game? Did she desire him because he was the first to not fall for her? No, it had gone beyond that. It was obvious he didn't like her, he may even despise her, but yet he would help her, defend her against the attack of his old friend, bind her wound. He wanted nothing from her but to help her get better. No one had ever done that before.

That meant something.

A feeling was percolating deep inside, welling up from the depths of her being. Overpowering embarrassment, fear, anger, everything else she was feeling, it sucked them all into the vortex of the light emanating from deep within. Was it love? She thought it was and suddenly she felt the light break forth and shine. Stinger was gone, at least where Mike Nantz was concerned

Mike looked back to see Natalia trailing behind him though he could have spotted her on his HUD's IFF. Moving quickly to catch up to Jorge who'd gathered a group of soldiers and was pushing to the upper level to link up with Emile something bothered him. The way Natalia had looked at him, the idea of her hand resting on his arm even though he couldn't feel it through the armor. All these things disturbed him. He had little experience with women, especially ones like Natalia Misriah. She'd been an irritant and now he found himself thinking of her differently. The way she looked at him made him nervous, something he hadn't been in ten years yet he liked the feeling he got in the pit of his stomach when she did. _This is crazy, I don't have time for this,_ he thought to himself. Still, maybe there was somethingâ€¦|.

A series of Needler rounds exploded into the bulkhead above him as a half-dozen Grunts pushed down a perpendicular corridor to cut him off from the others. Just like that, the thought was gone.

Leading with a grenade the force scattered the skittish creatures. The three members of Noble Team methodically moved higher up the

building.

Another explosion shook the building causing even the Covenant attackers to pause in fear of the place collapsing.

"Corvette's gonna tear this base apart. What's the situation, Noble?" Sword Control called out urgently on the general comm channel.

"Can't do this on my own! Need another Spartan up here!" Emile's urgent plea added to the tension of the situation.

"Six, get to the top floor and assist Emile," Carter demanded from his covering position below. "You got to pick up the pace."

Despite the orders and the call for help the trio was doing their best to make it to the top floor but heavy resistance slowed their pace. When they'd clear an area fresh opponents would materialize to slow them down. Mike led the way and around every corner he needed to slow and probe forward. Once discovering what they faced Mike would lead with a grenade while Jorge swept the area with his heavy machine gun. Even Natalia kept pace, covering the flanks of the pair and allowing them to focus on moving while a group of UNSC soldiers followed in their wake to clean up anything that had been missed.

As the trio got into a comfortable rhythm of fire and movement they were able to pick up their pace then suddenly they'd made it to the top. The upper floor of the building had been pummeled and lay in ruins. Going through a doorway a massive hole was in the place of where the roof and wall had once been. Prominent in the foreground was the Covenant Corvette but the huge warship was supported by an escort of single-seat Banshee fighters that flitted about the sky.

"About time," Emile grunted as he skirmished with some Covenant forces lodged on the upper floor.

Quickly gathering the small force that had arrived around him, Mike gave everyone their orders while Emile provided cover. "We need to clear the skies of those escorts so our Longswords can launch. Find rockets, anything to knock them out. The rest provide cover. We have to get rid of that Corvette or this base is screwed. Go." Then he looked at Natalia. Even though both were behind visors she could feel his eyes boring into hers. "Natalia, you cover the back door. Nothing that isn't human gets up here. Keep us clear to do what we need to do up here. I'm counting in you. Got it?"

Natalia vigorously nodded her head in agreement. Changing magazines and picking up some grenades she moved into position to defend her teammates. "I won't let you down Mike," she whispered.

Their moment of respite was just that, a moment. A Phantom Dropship hovered over the area and landed more troops to attack the base defenders including a pair of Elites. Between the ground fire and that coming from the sky the air was lit up with deadly ordinance. The human forces were able to knock down a couple of Banshees before the Covenant seemed to figure out their strategy. So not only did they have to fight the ground forces but now the strafing fighters. Mike worked with Emile and Jorge to try to keep the platform clear so the Army troopers could try to shoot down the Covenant air assets.

Every time though they would clear the destroyed upper floor more invaders would be dropped in to tangle with them and so the battle still hung in the balance.

"We need to drive those Phantoms off," Mike yelled at the rocket launcher armed soldiers. "Keep them clear so we can take out the Banshees."

While the other members of Noble Team fought desperately to establish control and strike out at the Corvette Natalia was hard pressed in her own right. Coming from below at least a dozen Covenant forces tried to surge past her. Fighting off growing panic she fired and moved around the access point not allowing any of her opponents to focus their fire on her. She was learning just how many hits her armor could take before she needed to pull back so got into a good rhythm of pushing forward and pulling back. Several times she was in such close quarters her survival instinct screamed to her to pull back. Each time she heard his voice say _I'm counting on you_ then whispered in return to herself, "I won't let you down Mike," and continued to fight. The reasons for her being there, the woman's past legacy, were all forgotten. She was there as part of the defense and that was all there was to it. She would do her part.

And she did.

The outmatched ONI officer's stubborn efforts to hold the rear allowed the three other members of Noble Team and the soldiers there in support to focus on eliminating the ground forces on the upper level. Dropping the last of the Covenant air screen, the UNSC fighters were finally able to launch.

"Yeah, clear," Emile called out jubilantly. That's the way we get it done Spartan! Clear."

"Noble Team, Longswords are inbound and ready to push. Orbital defense is standing by to take the shot," Sword Control reported with a sense of relief.

Two sweep-winged Longsword interceptor/strike fighters knifed towards the Corvette, which seemed to sense danger so started to pull away, breaking off the attack. The smaller bat-like fighters were able to make up the gap quickly but just as they were about to engage the pair broke formation and pulled out of their attack vector to the dismay of the UNSC troops watching from the ruined upper floor of the ONI building.

"What theâ€¦", Emile began in disgust.

Then a splitting sound filled the air as a MAC round ripped through the air suddenly penetrating the corvette from above. It seemed someone had finally decided it was okay to use the orbital defense platforms to assist in repelling this attack.

The Covenant vessel's engines flickered then it began to lose altitude. Finally a series of explosions from within the corvette caused it to nosedive then crash into a lake puncturing the clearing day. As if in concert, the heat of the summer sun burned off the morning fog.

Mike took a deep breath allowing himself to relax for a moment. He

did a quick shoulder check and saw Natalia behind him, as now seemed to be her place, 'on his six'. He began to realize he was starting to assume this and even count on her.

Something moved out of the shadows and Mike snapped into a defensive position but it was only Jorge ambling over.

"Beautiful, ain't it? Someone should take a picture," Jorge commented. Mike wasn't sure if he meant the downed corvette or the rugged terrain of the man's home planet. "Nice work, by the way," the big Spartan II added sincerely.

"I aim to please," Mike replied with a chuckle, allowing himself an instant of levity. It looked like they were going to live another day, all of them, which made him happy.

Then Jorge fixed Natalia with a penetrating look. "You too, good job out there today."

"Thank you," the woman responded, her heart soaring at the acknowledgement. Things seemed finally to be changing for her.

"Five, Six... Get down to the science wing," Commander Carter cut in on the team channel, "Doctor Halsey wants a debrief, and Command's saying we're all hers."

"Repeat? Sounded like you said Halsey," Jorge responded with a sense of apprehension.

"I did," Carter confirmed.

"Copy that, on our way," Jorge acknowledged then looked at Mike who was intently looking at the Spartan II. "Don't need Command to tell me... Been all hers half my life."

"You okay?" Mike asked.

"I'm fine. I guess there's some things you just can't get away from," Jorge commented sadly. "But then you likely know about that, don't you?"

Mike did, intimately. Then it hit him: Halsey. The creator of the Spartan II program, the one who he'd heard invented the process of body modification. A genius, or a madwoman, depending on who you asked. She was here on Reach. That surprised him but it shouldn't. She was a shadowy figure who seemed to come and go as she pleased and he was about to meet her.

"What you guys waiting for?" Emile came up to the group. "We got the invitation lets go see how the good doctor is going to make our lives more complicated."

As the group walked back into the base from the balcony the Covenant corvette sunk into the lake mirroring the sinking feeling of more than just Jorge.

It was a short trip for the Spartans and Natalia to the science wing. The rest of Noble Team was already there by the time they arrived while the venerable Dr. Catherine Halsey was standing behind a

transparent shield door with aggressive body language and a perturbed look on her attractive, but hard, face.

"I requested your assistance, Commander, and do not need a report on events that occur on my own doorstep," she berated the leader of Noble Team. "What I do require is a detailed account of your previous engagementâ€" "

Dr. Halsey paused in mid-sentence as she noticed the new arrivals to the room. Looking at Natalia her sour expression opened into a wide smile. "Ms. Misriah. I'd heard you were on Reach. It's been a while. How is your father?"

Emile snorted and said something inaudible under his breath in response. Kat chuckled in response.

"Fine ma'am," Natalia offered stiffly, aware the others on Noble noticed the particular attention.

"How do you like serving with Noble Team after your time at ONI High Command?"

"It's an honor ma'am," Natalia responded genuinely.

Dr. Halsey raised an eyebrow at the strength of the answer then turned her attention towards the Spartan II, HER Spartan II as she thought. "Jorge. It's been too long."

"Ma'am," he replied stiffly.

"What have you done with my armor?" she chided him like a naughty child.

"Just some...additions I've made," Jorge answered her uncomfortably.

"Indeed," Dr. Halsey responded, seemingly amused by the conversation. Then done with that, she returned her full attention to Commander Carter. "Visegr d Relay. Its data center was home to one of my xeno-archaeologists, Professor Laszlo Sorvad. Perhaps you could shed some light on his death."

The Noble Team leader wondered where the aggressive doctor was going with this line of questioning. "If he was a civilian male in his mid-sixties, he died with a Covenant Energy Sword through his abdomen," he reported.

"Elites, then," Dr. Halsey commented.

"They engaged us as well," Jorge offered, trying to diminish some of the growing tension. "It was just, uh, just after we found your scientist's daughter, ma'am. She was hiding in the-"

"Irrelevant," Dr. Halsey cut him off. "The Elites. Tell me more about them."

"Three. Zealot class," Jorge reported, unphased by the treatment. "One got by us. The leader, from the looks of him."

"Zealots? You're certain?" the doctor confirmed.

"Their armor configuration matched," Jorge added.

"Shield strength, too," Mike added, joining the conversation.

"I gave the order not to pursue. Our primary objective was to get the station's relay back online," Carter stated, trying to regain control of the interaction with the pushy woman.

"Your primary objective? Commander, are you a puppet or a Spartan?" Dr. Halsey shot back.

The rest of Noble started at the blunt statement to their leader.

"Ma'am?" Commander Carter asked, a bit dumbfounded.

Perhaps realizing she'd gone too far the aggressive scientist explained: "There are those at ONI, myself included, who believe the Covenant dispatch Elite advance teams to hunt down artifacts of value to their religion. Survivor accounts suggest such teams are small, nimble, and almost always Zealot-class. No doubt they came to the station for the abundance of ONI excavation data stored there. And you let them get away."

"Data retrieval was not a command directive," Noble's leader explained. "Even had we known, we had other, more urgent matters to attend to."

"Like warning the planet," Kat cut in, tired of the attitude of the older woman.

"Professor Sorvad's final entry in his field notes made reference to 'a latchkey discovery'," Halsey ignored her. "Latchkey... Not a word he would use lightly. So let's hope that the data module your Lieutenant Commander stole contains it," the woman shifted her steely gaze towards Kat.

"Kat?" Carter asked in confusion.

"Before you ask, I was alerted the moment you attempted to access its contents. As I am with any unauthorized tap," Dr. Halsey declared smugly then held her hand out for Noble Two to hand it over.

Kat walked over a bit sheepishly at being caught and placed the data module in a container in the shield door.

"That data is classified Tier One... I could send you to the brig for interfering with my work," Dr. Halsey stated to Kat as she pulled the container towards herself and into the secure room retrieving the module she sought.

"Maybe you'd like to join her," Commander Carter declared coldly.

"...I'm sorry?" Dr. Halsey asked, as if finally caught off guard.

"We're currently under emergency planetary directive, WINTER CONTINGENCY," the Noble Team leader stated. "I'm sure you're familiar

with the punishment for civilian interference with a Spartan deployment."

"Are you threatening me, Commander?" Dr. Halsey shot back angrily.

"Just making a reading suggestion, ma'am," Carter replied, voice even. Then looking to the team he ordered, "Let's move, Noble Team."

Jorge hesitated, unsure what to do and uncomfortable with how things were ending between the two sides he cared deeply about.
"Ma'am?"

Uninterested in the Spartan's turmoil, engrossed instead in the data module she replied absently, "That... will be all, Jorge."

Moving out to ensure the base was secure Kat walked past Natalia brushing her aside. "Hey, when are you and the doctor going to get together for tea?" the Spartan chided the woman.

Emile laughed at the comment while Mike stayed silent. Natalia felt as if all the gains she'd made that day were lost in the last five minutes.

10. Chapter 10

****Chapter 10****

****1035 hrs, August 1, 2552, New York City, Earth****

"Sirâ€|Mr. Misriah!"

The executive assistant to the CEO of Misriah Armory winced at the glare he received by interrupting the businessman's teleconference.

"I told you not to interrupt me Felstead," Spanner Misriah barked, waving his hand for the video screen to mute.

"I know that sir but this is urgent."

"What is it?" the powerful executive asked hesitantly, knowing his EA to not be one to brook his anger lightly.

"We've intercepted a communications to Naval Headquarters sir. Planet Reach is under attack by the Covenant."

Misriah's blood went cold. "Impossible," he sputtered. "They couldn't have found the planet."

"They have and are apparently there in force. At least one Supercarrier has been reported. A battle group is being dispatched to come to their defense but it doesn't look good."

"Nicolo, can you confirm this?" Misriah demanded.

The opaque image of an Italian gentleman dressed in Renaissance clothing appeared, hovering over the business executive's

desk.

"Well?" the man demanded testily to the Artificial Intelligence who floated with pursed lips and a look of concentration.

"Yes, what Eric says is true," the Smart AI confirmed the assistant's report in an Italian accent, "and the assessment is accurate as well," it added.

The fact that Spanner Misriah had an AI, and a highly rare Smart AI, spoke not only to his wealth but influence as well. While AI's ran many of the functionality of the UNSC and industry in general a 'smart' version was quite unique. Having no limitations in their dynamic memory-processor matrix, Smart AI's could not only be taught a vast wealth of information, but could learn and comprehend from their surroundings as opposed to their "dumb" cousins who could only learn one topic. Nicolo was Spanner Misriah's personal AI, formed in the personality of the 16th century philosopher Machiavelli, and possessing tremendous power to gather and assess information.

"Why did I have to find out from him and not you?" Misriah questioned testily.

"Because, my lord, I was not looking for it and ONI and UNSC's AI's blocked out the information," Nicolo responded huffily. "I had to find my data from Reach itself. This is information, after all, the rulers do not want in public hands. The peasants need not know this."

"I knew there was something going on there," MacKenzie Wainwright interjected into the conversation, voice filled with fear. "What are we going to do? Tali's on Reach. That's why I haven't been able to get ahold of her for days," her would-be boyfriend declared.

"I am aware of that MacKenzie," Misriah shot back testily. The handsome young executive opened his mouth to speak, fear growing. "Shut up and give me a moment to think about this." Spanner Misriah sighed heavily in frustration, already weighing his options and not needing to be reminded by the whiny executive.

The owner of Misriah Armory, which produced everything from assault rifles to Pelican dropships, had benefited from the war effort. The major supplier of arms and ammunition to the UNSC had grown rich and powerful to the point where he could not only afford but demand his own AI. Nicolo was testament to the influence of Spanner Misriah. The fact his beloved only child was in the middle of an unexpected alien invasion on a planet over ten light years away though upsetting did not leave him without options. He hadn't built an empire and become one of the most powerful men on earth by sitting back and waiting

"Get me Admiral Parangosky, now," Misriah demanded.

In less than two minutes the business executive had the assistant to the commander of Operational Naval Intelligence, headquartered in Sydney Australia, on the screen, verification to the power he did have.

"Golf 51979 wants to speak to you Ma'am," Captain Serin Osman reported to Margaret Parangosky, CINCONI.

The elderly woman with sharp features pursed her lips in surprise but already her razor sharp mind was calculating what she could get in return anticipating what the man was calling about.

"Very well, Serin, but do please get me a cup of coffee first," the most powerful woman in humanity requested pleasantly. "Jamaican Black."

Several minutes later the holoscreen on the admiral's desk switched to the image of an annoyed Spanner Misriah standing behind his desk with clenched fists at having to wait.

"Yes Mr. Misriah, what can I do for you?" the elderly woman asked pleasantly but her eyes betraying a hint of annoyance.

"Reach is under attack."

"I'm well aware of that but how do you know?" Parangosky shot back accusingly.

"I have my sources," Misriah evaded. "Listen, that's not important. My daughter's on that planet."

"Yes, she is, isn't she?" the admiral confirmed, raising her eyes in feigned surprise. Margaret Parangosky knew what all of her people were doing and Natalia Misriah was thought of as a key asset, though in a different light then the aggressive young woman and her ambitious father thought. "You arranged for her to be attached to Noble Team. To get some combat experience, wasn't it? Well, it appears as if she'll get plenty," the intimidating woman declared without a note of sympathy.

Misriah ignored the dig. "Listen, I want her off that planet and back here on Earth and I want it now."

"Sir, with all due respect," she said politely, "you know as well as I do that interfering in operational matters is not allowed and in combat situations is extremely difficult."

"Cut the crap Margaret," Misriah shot back. "You have the power and the ability to do this. I want it done."

"Mr. Misriah, I hope you realize Winter Contingency is in place on Reach right now. You're treading on dangerous ground."

"I'm not worried about that," Misriah brushed off the highest state of UNSC operational priority levels that had an explicit directive against civilian interference. "Just get my daughter off that planet."

"It's not that simple, even for me, especially in a real-time combat situation," Parangosky let the words hang, enjoying the obvious growing distress of the powerful man.

"Please, can't you do something for her?" Misriah asked, all the bluster out of his voice.

If I do this for youâ€¦|,"

"I understand the implications Admiral," Misriah confirmed quietly in desperation. "Just do it, please."

Both knew the implicit cost of the declaration and who now held power in their relationship. Though a war was raging on Reach and in other parts of the galaxy, the balance of another epic struggle had just shifted.

You owe me big for this one, the admiral thought to herself, _and I will collect. _"Very well Mr. Misriah. I'll take care of it."

The holoscreen went dark as the businessman signed off.

"Captain Osman, what is the closest Prowler available to undertake this mission?" she asked her aide for the location of an ONI stealth vessel, knowing the answer already.

"The Dusk, ma'am," the brown haired protÃ©gÃ© of Parangosky reported.

"Black Box."

"Here Admiral." The ONI 'Smart' Artificial Intelligence materialized beside the director. Projecting itself as a featureless box, the AI waited for the order it had already anticipated.

"Send a flash message to Captain Iglesias to reroute and to pick up Misriah's little princess. Send also a message to our people on Reach to arrange to get her to an extraction point."

"Already done Admiral. UNSC Dusk confirms receipt and is already calculating a slip to take them there," Black Box stated efficiently.

"Excellent," Parangosky responded, satisfied some good would be accomplished from the irritation of having to reroute one of her stealth vessels and interfere in ongoing operations on Reach. No, this was going to be a big credit in her account from now on.

"Ma'am," Captain Osman asked hesitantly, "what about Dr. Halsey? Should she be advised of the evac opportunity?"

"No," the Admiral answered with a gleam in her eyes, "we wouldn't want to interrupt the good doctor's work."

1130hrs August 1, 2552, Camp Independence, Highland Mountains, Planet Reach

After Sword Base had been secured by the humans the Covenant for some reason shifted their interest elsewhere. Noble Team spent the day there and with no serious threat other than some skirmishing the valuable assets had been moved.

And move they did.

For the next week the team had skipped all over the Highland Mountains region playing cat-and-mouse games with Elite Zealots who seemed very interested in the territory and several of the UNSC stations, including Castle Base in the region

Today the team was back in their base at Camp Independence. Located inside a large cavern in the shadow of a cliff in one of the many mountains dominating the area they had the opportunity to truly rest for a few hours, something that was becoming a scarcer commodity as the Covenant exerted growing control on the planet. With two Gauss Cannons protecting the main entrance to the location and a strong guard it was a place of respite.

Natalia sat down on a crate of supplies. Taking her helmet off the woman shook out her hair and looked up at the thick steel I-beams reinforcing the rock ceiling. Florescent lights illuminated the area. The secure facility had already been designated as a fallback position for Reach's HIGHCOM. No one hoped it would come to that but the signs of preparation for a growing reality were evident by the activities going on around the Spartan to strengthen the defenses.

After the fight for Sword Base a week earlier Jorge had started to treat Natalia better and Commander Carter would actually use her in combat. That being said, it was always in a support or defensive role and generally out of the center of action. Natalia wasn't sure if this was because he couldn't dump her anywhere else or based on a realistic estimate of her combat potential. Regardless, she was happy to be contributing. As for the rest of the team, Jun seemed indifferent but then the quiet sniper didn't share much. Kat and Emile, on the other hand, were still openly hostile towards her and often made her the butt of their jokes.

Then there was Mike.

She couldn't figure him out. At times he seemed to warm to her, even showing kindness. He definitely was helping her improve as a soldier, that was evident. But then other times he was cold and detached, like he had nothing but contempt for her. He'd look at her with his rock-like grey eyes as if he could see right through her. She'd always been able to read men quickly, to figure them out to get whatever she'd wanted. Not with this one. Everything he'd done had been freely given and he'd gotten nothing in return. That simultaneously bothered and exhilarated her. During some free time in the past week she'd pulled out her datapad and read some of MacKenzie's correspondence. The interplanetary communications relay was down so he couldn't send more messages. She wondered if that had him worried. Probably. But she didn't care. His messages were all self-serving with his own end in mind. Yes, they were full of compliments and praise for her. The newest spoke glowingly of how she was likely soaring in her assignment on Reach. That had caused her to laugh out loud with absolutely no mirth. It was the furthered from the truth and reminded her once again that this man, despite all his advantages, had no clue and really didn't want one.

No, Mike was different, unlike any man she'd ever met. Then the musing woman reminded herself he wasn't a man, he was a Spartan. But what did that mean? Sure, his body had been changed but what about his mind? What about his hopes and dreams? She was increasingly sure that behind the armor, the enhancements and the reputation Mike was all man and that was drawing her to him like gravity.

"I'm telling you, Covvies don't do this," Emile insisted as he cleaned his M45 Tactical shotgun. "They come in and glass the place.

This ain't their style. They're looking for something."

"This is Reach. It's different," Jorge insisted.

"Yea, any different from Harvest or any of the other planets?" the volatile Spartan shot back.

"What does it matter? Glass or conquer you know once they show up in force we're screwed," Kat interjected fatalistically.

"Not here though," Jorge continued doggedly. "We've got the orbital MACs plus the biggest fleet. We can win this."

"As if," Kat snorted.

What do you think ONI-girl?" Emile asked Natalia.

"Well...Iâ€|we have looked at some scenarios pertaining to Winter Contingency, but, I meanâ€|" she stammered caught off guard. In her eagerness to actually contribute something to the team her mind blanked.

It didn't matter.

The look of mirth on Emile's face and the derisive snort from Kat showed Natalia they weren't looking for her input but rather saw another opportunity to make her look foolish. And yet again she walked into it. Her face reddened in embarrassment. Looking away she saw Mike's jaw clench as he watched the scene but remained silent.

Commander Carter walked into the middle of the conversation eyeing it critically. "Listen up. We got a group of hingeheads poking around about ten clicks from Castle. They're supported and moving in the wrong direction. We're going to go and intercept. Saddle up!"

Ten minutes later Noble Team travelled by Falcon to the area of the reported contact. Dancing over the terrain the helicopters stayed low moving at full throttle. Satellite imagery had shown the Covenant party had stopped and seemed to be setting up a base of sorts near the critical structure.

Commander Carter had the Falcons drop them about two kilometers from the enemy position so as best to try to catch the invaders off guard. They'd hump it the rest of the way and try to get the jump on them. The team exited their transport in a defensive position as the Falcons soared back into the air and cleared the landing grid. This was the time they were most vulnerable to attack. Despite their IFF's showing nothing the Spartans had learned to not rely 100% on technology. While the waddling Grunts could be heard a mile away and Jackals were notoriously stealthy they still could be picked up. But they'd found out the Elites often had some form of cloaking device that allowed them to not only make themselves invisible but also not appear on their tracking devices.

Fortunately the only thing greeting them were some of the flightless Moa's indigenous to the planet grazing the peaceful meadow they landed in and some flying insects buzzing obliviously around.

"Three, scout ahead and get eyes on our target. I'm setting a marker for you," Carter ordered Jun as a waypoint popped up on his HUD.

"Roger that," the quiet sniper responded and trotted off noiselessly into a copse of evergreen trees, a testimony to his ability to move easelessly in bulky armor.

Giving him a head start the rest of the team moved slowly to cut the distance from their landing point to objective.

"This is Three, I'm in position," Jun whispered over the comms.

Commander Carter gave a hand signal for the rest to halt. "What have you got?" he asked.

"Covenant has set up some sort of operation hereâ€¦," the sniper paused as if assessing the situation. "I see four Zealots but also at least a half-dozen minor Elites. They'd got at least a half-company of Grunts."

"Armor?"

"Negative. Three Ghosts, that's it, plus what looks like excavation equipment. I'm establishing a live feed so you can see the lay of the land."

"Roger that." Carter viewed the set-up through his HUD and devised a plan. "Okay Three, we're moving into position. Hold and engage as opportunities arise when we move in." Then turning to the remainder of the squad he gave his orders. "Emile, straight up and assault the camp. Get those Elites. Jorge, you establish a fire base and also look after those Ghosts. Kat, you and I go right flank. Six, you and Misriah go left. When you're in position set your status light to green and then we go. Questions?"

There didn't need to be any.

"Okay, let's move."

Irritation well up anew within Mike as he carefully picked his route of advance. Once again he'd been effectively excluded from Noble Team. He'd have been okay with that. He still had a strong pull to work alone but not only couldn't he do that, or work with the other professional Spartans he was stuck with Natalia. It was like going into combat with a broken leg. Grudgingly he admitted she had picked up a lot, and he did have a degree of compassion for the woman who was trying hard to contribute but this was getting ridiculous.

For Natalia, she'd been watching Mike now long enough she could read his body language despite the MJOLINIR armor he wore. Mike was irritated again. This seemed like a frequent theme. His declaration that 'even spoiled little rich girls deserved a second chance' had stuck with her and given her a great hope. She'd hoped this would lead to a deepening of their relationship. But it didn't. He still treated her with polite indifference, like a mentally-challenged child. That burned her. Men flocked to her, would do anything for her, and yet this man would barely give her the time of day. But then he wasn't any other man, he was a Spartan, he was the Lone Wolf. More

frustrating for her was that this made him the more desirable.

Tali, you gotta shake this, she chided herself, _you're developing a crush on this guy in the middle of combat. You need to focus or you're going to get yourself killed_. Then a chilling thought struck her: â€|_or worse, him._

Noble Team arrived in their designated positions and green status lights winked in the HUDs. It was time to move. It appeared the Covenant forces were unaware of the advancing UNSC party, focused instead on the digging operation they'd begun. Grunts waddled around doing the manual labor while the Elites stood around watching. Best still was the nimble Ghost vehicles stood empty and switched off.

"Go, go, go!" Carter ordered over the comms and Noble Team leapt into action.

Aggressively sweeping in the Spartans caught the Covenant forces off guard. Guns blazing and grenades flying the exploration party didn't stand a chance. In less than two minutes half the Grunts were down and four Elites lay in the grassy field dead while a thin trail of cloud from the destroyed Ghosts lazily drifted in the air.

With Jorge anchoring the position Emile and Jun sweep the perimeter for other enemy or remnant. The scattered force had run off into the woods surrounding the area. The 'all clear' signal sent, the team was able to relax.

Examining the equipment the Covenant party had left behind Emile gave one of the pieces a frustrated kick. "What the heck are they doing here?"

"I don't know," Kat responded, running a scan of the machinery with her datapad while capturing images. "Digging for something."

"But for what?" Noble Four exclaimed. "You think this has to do with what Halsey was talking about back at Sword Base? Some sort of search for artifacts?"

"It doesn't matter," Commander Carter interjected. "That's not our job to figure this crap out. We blow the machinery up then prep for extraction."

Using explosives they'd brought along for the task in short order the Covenant equipment was destroyed.

"Charlie One and Charlie Two, be advised we are ready for extraction on this position, over," Carter called to their Falcon transports.

"Roger that, we're ten minutes out," the pilot of the lead helicopter responded.

Satisfied with the success of their mission and with nothing else to do the team had the opportunity to relax. It was a gorgeous summer day and the air in the highlands though warm was not humid but instead intoxicatingly fresh. Stripping off their helmets the Spartans enjoyed being able to suck in non-filtered air.

"Hey, look what I found," Kat called out, holding a bunch of wild blueberries she'd found hanging thick from a series of vines nearby. She threw a bunch to Mike and another to Emile who eagerly dug into the delicious fruit.

Instead of joining them Mike put the bunch into his satchel and commented, "Shouldn't we mount a guard until our transport arrives?"

Carter shrugged nonchalantly, satisfied with how the mission had gone. "Suit yourself. Why don't you and Misriah cover it?"

Kat gave Mike a wink while Emile chuckled. So he was part of the team but not part of the team. Fine, he could live with that. Natalia? Well, she was a different story all together.

"Cover the west approach," Mike ordered the woman, "I'll take the east." Then he stomped off in a foul mood.

Helmets off, the rest of the Spartans enjoyed the intoxicating fresh air of the highlands region instead of the processed air they normally experienced. The day was warm and sunny with a light breeze. For that moment it seemed the war had left Reach. Mike, idly searching the area with his MA37 on his shoulder had his helmet off as well, still irritated by the circumstances. Only Natalia had put hers back on.

Though alert the woman allowed her mind to drift. Despite the continued chiding of some of the Spartans on Noble Team she now felt comfortable in this environment. She'd fought well again in this engagement and again held her own. She now was also comfortable in a support role, looking to fill gaps as they came. She didn't need to be out front and knew she didn't have the skill or ability. In the past that would have bothered her, seeing it as some form of competition, but now she was happy to be part of a team. It seemed as if she were growing up.

Mike spat into the grass. He'd tried to fit into the team and was certainly contributing to their overall mission, but still felt at arms-length. Was it him or because he was helping Natalia? He didn't get it. He'd fought his 'lone wolf' instinct and reputation to try to become a team player and it seemed to have been rejected.

Confusion welled up in the young man. Despite his years of combat he was still only 22 years old. He looked at Natalia with a mixture of frustration and envy. He'd been thrust into combat as a child and never had a chance to really live so never had the chance to experience fully the rest of life, to dream, to plan, to explore, to loveâ€¦

Mike dwelled on the last thought while continuing to look at Natalia. Could he love a headstrong woman like that? She was certainly attractive enough, but it took more than that. Kat was his friend, like a sister to him. No, he couldn't love her like that. There'd been another: Melanie. Mel had been with him at Camp Curahee. She'd been with the others on Operation Torpedo and like the others hadn't come back. But by that point he'd already been sent off, yet the feelings between the two had remained. Despite their physical size they were still teenagers with teenage emotions. It had been

confusing but it had felt good.

After he'd received the word Mel was gone he'd put those feelings away into the deepest recesses of his soul and double locked the door. The pain had been too great. It seemed everyone he felt something for died. Then, looking at Natalia Misriah an old, long dormant spark seemed to be lit.

Mike shook his head, as if trying to shake the feeling out his ear and tried to concentrate on what he was doing.

Natalia saw a red blip come up just on the outside of her HUD for a moment then it was gone. Had she been seeing things? She wasn't sure. The woman opened her mouth to call out an alarm then paused. If it was nothing she'd again look foolish and be embarrassed for another time. She didn't want that. Mike wasn't moving, he hadn't reacted. Then she realized he didn't have his helmet on, none of them did. Only she had her IFF activated. She decided the safety of the team, of Mike, was more important than her dignity.

"Contact!" she called over the team channel, "Contacts inbound and imminent."

The Spartans of Noble Team reacted instantly, grabbing gear and moving from the exposed area. It was just in time too for at the same time as they moved Natalia's HUD lit up with red contacts and the menacing sound of an inbound plasma mortar round could be heard. The deadly blob of energy hissed in impacting on the spot the rest of Noble Team had been hanging around less than a minute earlier.

"Shift position," Carter called, "they've got this place zeroed!"

Jorge laid down covering fire on a wide arc to allow the rest of Noble Team to regroup. A horde of Grunts came screaming out of the woods while Beam Rifle fire from hidden Jackals punctured the summer air.

"Got to counter this," Carter called out to the team, "force them offline so we can hold this spot."

Then two more plasma mortar rounds dropped in and the high-pitched swoop of Banshee attack fighters joined the chorus of counterattacking Covenant.

"Boss, we got at least two Wraiths inbound," Jun reported urgently.

Infantry with air support and now armor. It was more than even Noble Team could handle.

"Fall back," Carter ordered, "we're withdrawing from here." A waypoint popped up on the team's HUDs to mark their rally point.

"Come on, we can take them," Emile declared, spoiling for a fight.

"Negative. There's too many of them," Carter countered, "and this

location has no strategic value. It's not worth the risk." Switching channels the team leader made his report. "Castle Control this is Noble One. Be advised Covenant have moved in force to our position. Dislodging will take concerted ground and air assets. Falcon One and Two, our LZ is too hot, switching to secondary extraction point I'm marking now."

Doing a fighting withdrawal the Spartans of Noble Team and Natalia moved carefully away from the location the Covenant seemed so intent on holding. The attackers pursued them only a short distance then settled with sending a group of Skirmishers to harass them the rest of the way. It appeared the invaders were content to merely retake the spot.

Reaching their extraction point the sound of inbound Falcons greeted them. The team stayed focused though since the last time they'd let their guard down it had almost cost them their lives.

You saved our bacon," Jorge declared to Natalia, acknowledging the timely warning that had likely saved them.

"Yea, you did," Kat added incredulously, "thanks."

Natalia couldn't help but smile at the acknowledgement though Mike remained silent and sullenly kept himself away from the group.

"Man, Covvies really wanted that spot bad," Emile stated, still covering their withdrawal from the rear. "What the heck's there that's worth it?"

As the Falcons swooped in to pick up the team from their fallback point each of them had the same thought- the Covenant were definitely looking for something. Could it be the artifacts Dr. Halsey had seemed so interested in? But what were they?

11. Chapter 11

****Chapter 11****

****0630hrs August 2, 2552, Highland Mountains, Planet Reach****

It wasn't a happy group of Spartans that gathered to debriefed and clean weapons after their unsuccessful encounter with the Covenant the previous day. An attempt from Castle Base had been made to dislodge the attackers but the Covenant had fought doggedly for the area so the humans had eventually allowed it to happen until they could bring greater assets to bear. The reason for them being there was still a mystery though it was rumored that Dr. Catherine Halsey and the ONI group had been interested in Noble Team's video capture of the encounter.

Regardless, Noble didn't like having to withdraw, even if there was no tactical advantage to the area.

"HIGHCOMM concurs with your assessment," Colonel Holland reported over videocomm to Commander Carter. "There's a definite pattern to Covenant activity like the one you encountered. There does seem to be a concentration of activity around areas where relics are located. What that means and the tactical implications are still being

assessed by the chain of command. They've decided we need to get more information so you've been retasked into a recon role."

"Recon sir?" Carter asked in surprise.

"Yes son," Holland responded. "I know you don't like it, I can hear it in your voice," the wise handler of Noble Team acknowledged, "but we need to know what the Covvies are up to if we're going to have a chance of beating them here."

"It's just, sir, well, we're better as a strike force and it's sure needed," Carter countered.

"I get that, but this is a higher priority right now," Holland declared, "and so you're being pulled. We need people we can count on to get this right the first time and that means your team Commander."

"All right," Carter understood the implicit order. "Rules of engagement?"

"Avoid contact at all costs. This is a 'sneak-and-peak' op. Go in, gather information, get out. Especially don't let the hingeheads know what you're doing since they seem to be co-ording their actions in these areas. We don't want them to know we're trying to figure out what they're doing."

"That's not the norm for this team, sir."

"True enough," Holland acknowledged, nodding his head in agreement on the screen. "But then not much of this invasion is." The Colonel stopped speaking, as if reflecting for a moment. "Noble Six has a lot of experience with this type of mission, use that skillset and get the job done Noble Lead. I'm counting on you. Noble Actual out."

Commander Carter sighed audibly and looked up at the ceiling of the building acting as their temporary headquarters obviously unhappy with the orders he'd received. "You heard the man and you know the drill. New tasking. All right Six," he acknowledged, "how do we go about this?"

Mike paused for a moment, doing a quick assessment. He'd been given an opportunity to use his skills from the past for the betterment of the team and mission. It was also an opportunity for Natalia to prove her worth as she'd been doing of late. Though he still struggled with his place on Noble Team Mike Nantz was prepared to lead the way.

"Okay," he began, ready to take charge, "we need to break up into smaller sub-units. Jun and Emile, you form one team, Kat and I form another."

"Oh, not you and me?" Emile responded in mock hurt. "We don't play well together Wolf?" the volatile Spartan taunted.

Mike ignored the dig. "Jorge, you and Commander Carter will act as a Quick Response Force. Sorry, but your size is not conducive to this type of op."

"No problem," the Spartan II answered in his distinct accent, "I'm not good at disappearing."

"Good. You'll have Falcon Charlie One on standby in case we get into trouble. Lt. Comm. Misriah will be with you."

"Be on logistics and comms," Commander Carter cut in, overriding what Mike was going to do, "since she's not suited for this type of field assignment."

Mike hesitated for a moment and looked hard at Noble Team's leader with an irritated expression on his face. Carter in return stared back at him ready for the argument. The Lone Wolf backed down.

"All right, now that we have our roles here are some things to consider." Mike then went on to give some tips and tactics he'd learned over the years of doing this type of mission regularly. Despite their skepticism, especially from Emile, the others were impressed by the Wolf's insights and how quickly he could bring a viable plan for the assignment together.

Commander Carter was not about to let Natalia Misriah in the field in this kind of role. He had no confidence in her ability and felt she would compromise a mission he didn't want. Grudgingly he had to admit she had been fighting well thus far but attributed that to Mike B-312's help and covering for her. He'd also noticed that something seemed to be growing between the two of them and that irritated him as well. No, it was time for Noble Six and the ONI officer to spend some time apart.

Natalia struggled badly with the assignment for this next mission on several levels. First, yet again a lack of confidence in her had been publicly stated which irritated the proud woman resulting in her being shuffled aside. She also felt for Mike who had been obviously overruled, though that was the team leader's prerogative. But she found herself most upset that Mike and Kat would be together for as long as this mission went on. Was it jealousy? She wasn't sure. She'd never been jealous before in her life. Regardless, she didn't like it.

As the team dismissed to prepare for this new assignment Mike stopped Natalia. "Listen, I want you to know that you earned a spot on this mission besides rear echelon." He looked at her awkwardly, avoiding eye contact, as if embarrassed. "I just wanted you to know that."

"Thanks," she responded, caught off guard by Mike's sincerity. "I appreciate that." Then Natalia Misriah heard something come out of her mouth she'd never expected: "How I feel isn't important. What's important is the success of this mission and protecting Reach. Noble's lucky to have you."

Mike was visibly moved by the humble statement. "Well, you've been doing well. Your chance will come, likely sooner than anyone expects. Hang in there."

The two departed for their relative assignments. Mike left confused, Natalia uplifted and suddenly not feeling so bad.

With the mission established the Spartans swung into action and Noble

Team disappeared from the grid. They'd been given a series of areas to explore and report on. With Mike planning the operations they went off without a hitch and the QRF of Carter and Jorge hadn't been needed. Though the Covenant was pressing hard in certain areas, in others they were content to hold. Despite the length of time they'd been on Reach the invaders had yet to fully exert themselves. Nothing the Spartans came up with seemed to make any sense as to why this was the case.

Natalia placed herself in the base ops center they were working out of settling in to try to keep herself busy, but there was little to do after the action of the previous week. She tried to rationalize her disappointment. She'd fought hard in their recent engagements, even saving the team, or so Jorge and Mike had said. Yet still she was an outsider, not fully accepted.

But then what could she expect?

She wasn't a Spartan, she wasn't Noble. She was an 'adjunct', an annoying addition who was supposed to be with the team for a milk-run mission and then have her war stories to share back on earth afterwards. Now she was in a real war, fighting for her life and the lives of those she was starting to care about. The idea of 'expendable soldiers' that she'd written reports endorsing in the abstract now made her want to retch. None were expendable, especially those who'd been taken or tricked as children. She knew the need, the odds against humanities survival, she knew they needed these programs but now, living with these people, she'd never be able to think of them the same way again.

Especially Mike.

Sitting in the ops center, listening again to Kat's playful banter and Mike's measured responses just like at the defense of Sword Base the proud woman's heart was tugged anew. The two not only worked well together but fit well together. Were they on their way to becoming a couple? That likely wasn't possible but should it? Would she step aside for a woman who lived as Mike did? She should but she wouldn't.

Natalia began to see Mike as deserving something more, more than what Kat could offer. She had nothing against the Spartan who seemed to delight in making her look bad. Was it jealousy? She'd never considered that before. No, she had nothing but the highest respect for Kat-B320. It was just she felt Mike deserved to know there was life outside of war, privation and suffering. Would he even be able to accept it? She thought he would and she could show it to him. Thoughts of MacKenzie and any other man were long from her mind now, a first for the head-strong woman.

That concept kept her in her position, doing her duty instead of seeking to climb a corporate ladder. She'd do what she'd been ordered, she'd serve and he'd notice. At least that's what she prayed would happen.

Kilometers away, Kat and Mike sat in an overwatch position under a punishing summer sun observing a Covenant team once again digging for something. The volatile female Spartan had requested an airstrike even though she knew it would be turned down to at least give the guise of action. Watching the group of Grunts scudding back and forth

and satisfied the Jackals who were to be on guard duty were even more bored than she was, Kat decided to liven things up a bit.

"So what's up with you and Lt. Comm. Rich Girl?" Kat asked bluntly.

"What do you mean by that?" Mike retorted, not looking up from his own pair of binoculars.

"You guys seem to have a bit of a thing going," she shot back.

"I'm just helping her, that's all."

"That's all, huh?" Kat questioned.

Mike knew the woman well enough to know she'd raised her eyebrow underneath her Mark V helmet. "Why are you so down on her all the time?" he demanded.

"And why are you cutting her so much slack?" Kat retorted. "You know as well as the rest she doesn't belong here. Probably got daddy to hook her up on some adventure."

"You don't know that. Besides, she can't pick her father and likely can't control what a guy like that will do," Mike answered doggedly. "Everyone deserves a chance to stand on their own merit."

"Oh yea? Did I deserve to be kidnapped as a kid? Did I pick this?" Kat's voice rose despite the modulation of the microphone in her helmet

"Come on Kat, that's not what this is about," Mike countered, not wanting to go there.

"The hell it's not," she had trouble keeping her voice down. "It's about privilege man. The sooner you get that through your idealistic head the better you'll be. The chick's trouble and not worth the effort."

"Listen, I know she doesn't belong here and doesn't fit in. I get that." Mike's temper rose. "But she's here and we're in the middle of all this crap. What would you do? Throw her to the wolves."

"That's an interesting choice of expression Mike, coming from the Lone Wolf."

"None of this is of our choosing Kat," Mike tried to reason. "We can't control much of what happens to us but we can control what we do about it."

"Yea, what about Melanie? How much control did she have when she was sent off on Torpedo?" Kat pressed, mentioning a girl that had been part of their training group and Mike had developed a relationship with.

"Now why would you choose her?" the Lone Wolf shot back, hurt edging into his voice. "This has nothing to do with Natalia."

"Oh, now she's Natalia is she?" the woman mocked. "So you have forgotten Mel?"

Mike suddenly grabbed Kat's good hand and squeezed her so hard the tough Spartan winced. "I have NOT forgotten her. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her and what happened. Every day I wish I had been with her and the rest of the team and I was dead with them. Don't you dare use that line on me."

Mike released his iron grip and looked away signaling he didn't want to talk anymore.

Flexing her hand several times to get the circulation going after the crushing hold Kat realized she'd gone too far. "Hey, Mike, listen manâ€|. I'm sorry. I was out of line. Mel was my friend too." She paused, angry at herself and angry at the circumstances around her. Snatching the binoculars out of Mike's hands she snarled, "Damn the Covenant, damn ONI and damn the politicians who put people like us in these positions."

Mike grunted but said nothing. He'd already been struggling enough with his feelings about Natalia. To be reminded of Melanie only made things cloudier. He'd thought coming out of his protective shell was a good thing but now all he wanted to do was be alone and let the Lone Wolf run.

****2130 August 11, 2552 Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

"This is a HIGHCOMM priority mission," Commander Carter reiterated to the team. No one needed to be told that. The fact they'd been flown to the Viery Territory from where they'd been scouting for the past week confirmed that.

"So what's really up boss?" Emile asked, sharpening his Kukri knife. "We gonna stop screwing around and get back in the fight?"

"You afraid someone else is going to win the war for you?" Jorge grunted.

"Naw, I just want to do what I've been trained for rather than act like some ONI spook," the volatile Spartan stated, giving Natalia a dirty look. "I want to know if we're working for her," he gestured to the ONI officer who avoided the glare.

"Nothing has changed Four so stow that crap," Carter ordered. "An area not far from here has gone dark. That means no radar, probes or anything else had been able to penetrate it. Something's happening in there and we need to know what."

"Physical probes, sir?" Jun asked.

"Three teams, including one ODST, have gone in already and none have come out," Noble One reported.

Jorge whistled.

"Yea, so that's why we're here. We've been tasked with penetrating the Dark Zone and figuring out what the heck is going on there. Six, what's the plan."

"All right, sir," Mike stepped forward. "A two man team is going to insert in three hours. That'll be Jun and I. Kat, you'll run comms,

the rest will be Quick Reaction support in case we get in too deep or find something interesting. Any questions?"

"What about me?" Natalia asked quietly.

Mike looked right at Commander Carter who made no indication. "You'll be part of the QRF."

"I'll save you a seat," Emile stated, patting his lap.

Natalia didn't care. Mike had included her in the team even if Noble One had said nothing. The idea of no one coming out of the Dark Zone worried her but her confidence in Mike was such that if anyone could pull this mission off it would be him.

With little time the team split to prep for the mission. Mike went to the armory to get the kit he felt he'd need. Engrossed in though he hadn't realized someone had followed him to that part of their base of operations. Turning to leave he was startled to see Natalia standing there with her helmet off, looking at him. Her emerald green eyes seemed to bore right through the visor of his helmet. Despite the red MJOLNIR armor she wore it still showed her figure in a flattering way. It was a distraction he didn't need as he was about to go on mission.

"Anything I can do for you?" Mike asked.

"Iâ€¦justâ€¦.I just came to wish you luck," Natalia stammered, her cheeks flushing red deeper than her armor. "Take care of yourself."

"Thanks." Mike was touched by the sentiment and realized that suddenly how Natalia Misriah felt mattered to him. Maybe Kat had been right. "You too, take it easy."

"It won't be hard with you doing all the work for us," Natalia declared playfully, her face lighting up.

"Hey, chin up," Mike returned. "Don't worry, we'll get you back to that guy who's waiting for you on earth and you'll have a helluva story to tell," he awkwardly tried to match her previous statement.

If Mike had punched her in the stomach it wouldn't have hurt any more. As the Spartan turned and walked away Natalia winced at the declaration. MacKenzie? That was another life, another person. That was a path no longer for her. Couldn't Mike see how she felt? Didn't he know? Of course not. It's not like she'd told him and the young man, despite all the war he'd seen, likely wasn't too experienced in these things.

Not like you Stinger the little voice in the back of her mind chided. _You've got lots of experience. _Condemnation flooded in but she worked hard to push it back.

"No, I've changed!" Natalia said to herself a little too loud.

Mike stopped dead in his tracks. "What?" he asked in surprise, almost as if hoping for something. "Did you say something?"

She had her moment. '_TELL HIM'_ a new voice screamed but already the voice of condemnation won out. "Nothing. I didn't say anything."

All right. I'll see you when I get back," Mike stated and walked away.

Maybe all she deserved was MacKenzie. Natalia quickly jammed her helmet on her head so Mike wouldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes if he turned back to look at her.

But he didn't.

Several hours later was Mike was in an environment in which he felt comfortable. He continued to struggle with his place on the team and what it meant to be part of Noble. Acceptance seemed to ebb and flow both ways. They struggled with him, he struggled with them. That was nothing in comparison to his thoughts on Natalia Misriah. It was as if the woman was trying to tell him something but he couldn't figure out what it was. In truth, the beautiful woman scared him to death. She was way out of his league in probably a dozen categories yet involuntarily he kept thinking about her. Was that being disloyal to Mel? Melanie was dead and they'd never truly articulated their feelings for each other. They'd always thought there'd be another opportunity, a better opportunity. Then he'd been assigned to Special Ops and she'd died in Operation Torpedo and they'd never have the chance to tell each other the things each had wanted to.

There'd never been the time.

Would he allow himself to fall into the same thing again? Did he even know how he felt? Should he be embarrassed to have feelings for a woman who could likely buy a dozen men like him? He wanted to scream.

"Elite ahead, take him out quietly," Jun whispered over their comms.

Not scream, kill something.

Mike slipped through the shadows on the unsuspecting Elite patrolling the ridge line. Quietly unsheathing his combat knife he crept up like a wraith behind the tall Sangheili and quickly drove the blade on an angle up the top of the creature's spine and into its brain. The alien warrior gasped in surprise then gurgled before being lowered to the ground dead.

Gripping his SRS99 AM sniper rifle and moving with Jun gave a sense of familiarity to the troubled Spartan. Things in the mission were complicated already but these were ones he could gladly handle. Matters of the heart? They were way out of his comfort zone. Yet they remained; the feelings grew despite his every effort. They'd need to be dealt with.

But not yet.

The pair of Spartans had moved into the dark zone and eliminated several Covenant guard posts but there was something eerily still about the territory that got Mike's sixth sense up in alarm. Yet this was a complication he could deal with, this was the domain of the Lone Wolf. Yes, maybe if he was lucky he'd not come out either and so

wouldn't have to deal with the less familiar complications that seemed to be cropping up despite the war he was supposed to be fighting.

12. Chapter 12

****Chapter 12****

****Recon Bravo Mission Time +3:35hrs, August 12, 2552 Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

Eliminating several more guard posts and moving deeper into the dark zone Mike felt a sense of calm come over him despite the growing anxiety of the mission. This was nothing new to him, familiar ground. Jun was a consummate professional and talked little which suited Mike just fine. The pair moved well together and melded into the inky black of night. With the string of sentries removed they were able to move more quickly into the area that was showing up as blank on their IFFs.

The calm of the night was shattered by the sound of gunfire, human gunfire interspersed with Covenant.

"What the heck is that?" Mike asked more to himself.

"I don't know but it's definitely human and it's coming from over this ridge. Let's move Six," Jun responded.

The pair picked up their pace as the sounds of battle intensified becoming less concerned about stealth. The trail opened up to an abandoned pumping station. Of greater importance than the nature of the structure it appeared as if several militia troopers were under attack by Covenant forces.

"Noble Two, that's some sort of pump station," Jun reported back to Kat who was coordinating their communications. "Got eyes on civilians, I'm thinking more local militia, they've engaged hostiles."

"Move to assist," Kat ordered. "They may have Intel we need."

"You heard her, Six. Keep those civilians alive," Jun commented, raising his sniper rifle up to his shoulder and in one motion shooting an Elite through the head. "Come on, let's go!"

Charging into the fray the two Spartans were hailed by the beleaguered civilian fighters. Systematically moving into and around the station while the militiamen held their position Mike and Jun worked to eliminate the threat. The Covenant force turned out to be fairly small so they were dealt with in short order.

The humans gathered on an exposed deck of the pumping station around a couple of long metallic cases.

"Little more action than we're used to," a stocky, bearded man commented dryly. "You Spartans are good in a fight."

"What are you doing here?" Jun responded as Mike surveyed the motley crew of militiamen suspiciously. "Whole area's supposed to be

evacuated."

"Didn't like leaving it to someone else to protect our home. So we came back, for this," the militiaman indicated to the cases. "We have 'em hidden all over the territory."

The cases electronically opened as if on command revealing various UNSC weapons stuffed within.

"You know this stuff is stolen," Jun commented, shaking his head in disbelief.

"What? You gonna arrest me?" the colonist shot back, hand tensing on the assault rifle he carried.

"No. Gonna steal it back," Jun retorted.

A distinctive high-pitched hum signaled to the humans the conversation about stolen weapons was moot. Now it was time to fight.

"Another dropship coming in," Jun called out.

"Everyone, defensive position," Mike ordered. "We need to hold them off. You men, hold this area," he ordered the militiamen, "We'll clear the rest."

The Phantom carrying the attacking force flared just out of range of the pumping station and began disgorging its troops. In typical fashion the Grunts led the charge while Jackals looked for targets of opportunity before the Elites exploited any openings. Initially the humans were able to keep the force off their perimeter but then a second and third Phantom showed up reinforcing the attacking group. The tight formation of the humans was broken and the battle became a free-for-all.

There was no more use for a sniper rifle so dropping it Mike fought with an assault rifle. _Covvies must really want to keep us out of this area_ Mike thought to himself as he walked a stream of high velocity rounds into a group of three Grunts. One of the waddling, squawking creature's methane tanks exploded sending a yellow gaseous cloud spewing crazily into the night sky.

All around the air buzzed and was lit up by human and alien ordinance.

A group of Skirmishers joined the fight, their distinctive crow-like head plumage showing their addition. While a number of militiamen went down under the onslaught the remainder tightened into a defensive cordon on the highest level of the pumping station able to keep the Covenant at bay. That left Jun and Mike to move around the periphery.

The Covenant became so thick for Mike that it was impractical to shoot. Instead using the butt end of his assault rifle he systematically moved through the attackers beating a swath through them. A roaring Elite tried to use the confusion to come behind Mike and grapple with him. Grabbing him in a death grip the taller Sangheili began to try to squeeze the life out of Mike. Mike smashed his helmeted head back into the maw of the creature just as his

shield drained and the alarm went off. In one smooth motion Mike deftly pulled his combat knife and drove it through the Elite's shielding and into its head. The Sangheili screamed in pain and surprise even while it dropped to the deck of the station dead.

Mike was vulnerable and he knew it. He'd dropped his weapon in the fight with the Elite and two more drove in to avenge their fallen comrade.

At that moment Mike wasn't ready to die. For years he'd been ready, even sought it at times, but always he'd cheated the Grim Reaper. Now, he wanted to live. Was it Natalia? His conversation with Kat days earlier when they were on overwatch came back to him. Maybe he did have feelings for her but who was he kidding? She was ONI and her name was Misriah. He was a disposable soldier. Maybe it would be easier to die.

Crack Crack

Two shots from a high powered rifle rang out and both Elites went down within a second of each other with holes in their heads. Mike looked and saw Jun give him a quick wave then carry on. He'd have more time to ponder the question.

Eventually the human forces were able to eliminate the Covenant attack.

"Looks like the idea of a stealth mission is out the window," Jun commented.

"Looks like it," Mike responded, reloading the assault rifle he'd picked up.

"But why are they fighting so hard for this area? There's nothing here but that lake."

"What about the road?" Mike asked the militia leader who had joined them with the remnant of his troopers. "Where does it go?"

"Road leads to a hydro-electric plant, but the gate doesn't work," he answered.

"Alternate route?" Jun asked.

"We use the riverbed to smuggle rations, weapons...", the militiaman answered.

"Basically anything the UNSC considers contraband," Jun cut in.

"Basically," the bearded man from Reach shrugged.

"Then that has to be something," Mike declared, "because something is creating this field and even the Covenant don't fight so hard for nothing."

Jun nodded his head at the logic of the statement then said to the leader of the militia force, "Show us."

With the men from Reach leading the way they ushered Jun and Six the

short distance to the riverbed. It wasn't overly big but it was a significant terrain feature. The river had obviously been substantial in the past since it cut deep into the rocky terrain. The depression made for excellent cover.

"There's the riverbed, Six," Jun observed. "Let's see where it goes."

The two Spartans fanned out and took the lead with the remnant of the militia troop falling in behind.

The group moved cautiously since the motion tracker on the Spartan's HUDs wasn't reliable. The air was still, with no sounds to be heard. The night sky seemed darker than usual, likely caused by whatever the Covenant was using to shield this part of the region.

"Where does this riverbed lead?" Jun asked quietly.

"Straight to the hydro plant," the militia leader answered. "We dammed this river up forty-five years ago; plant powers every settlement in the territory. Shame if it all gets wasted."

"Doing what we can," Jun responded.

Mike was impressed by the compassion of the quiet sniper. For his part, the wishes of the locals had not even entered into his mind. It never did. He'd always chalked that up to focus on the mission but of late he'd been considering the compassion he possessed. He cared, but about what he wasn't certain. With his childhood shattered by the traumatic death of his family, then defined by his training as a Spartan he'd not really had the opportunity to develop normal emotional responses. Had that been part of the training? To make them feel nothing? If it had been, it had failed. Mike felt lots.

A Phantom dropship passed overhead, a spotlight sweeping the area as if looking for something, calling Mike back to focus. No time for such musings.

Jun held up his hand to signal a halt. "Hold up. Covvie dropship, take cover."

The Phantom continued its sweep, seemingly oblivious to what lurked below. The presence of the ship seemed to point to the fact something of importance lay ahead. Satisfied they were in the clear again Jun motioned them to continue. Moving carefully and using the shadows to their advantage the humans moved like ghosts further up the river bed until they eventually reached the hydro-electric plant. Rounding a corner of the dried up river the group had a great view of the facility and what lay there.

"What the heck?" Mike declared in surprise as he caught sight of not only a strong Covenant presence but some form of pylon prominent at the plant. The dark blue human building was punctured by a tripodal pylon constructed with three legs, three gunnery platforms, and three curved spines on the top of the structure that were slowly spinning. These spines seemed to be emitting pulses every few seconds as they spun around. Protecting it, the small walkway encircling the whole building had operational plasma cannons set up. Completing the unencouraging picture, a small gravity lift could be seen coming out of the base

"Kat, are you seeing this?" Jun called back to their ops center. "Covenant structure, kind of a big pylon. Heavily fortified."

"That's the source of our dark zone," Kat answered emphatically.

"Ok, consider it gone," Jun responded.

"Negative, stick a remote det charge on it," Kat countered. "Command's planning something big; they say that pylon dies at dawn."

"We're gonna blow it?" the leader of the militia troop asked after Jun finished with Kat.

Mike looked at Jun who shrugged.

"We're going to clear the area, and then I'll plant a remote debt charge," the sniper confirmed. "You want to provide some cover, go right ahead."

Mike took charge of the plan. "I'll the lead the assault on the bridge. You follow. We hit hard and roll them up. No stopping. Keep moving. Jun, you got to clear those plasma cannons or we're hamburger."

"No problem," the sniper declared confidently, checking his ammo count. "I'll follow and then plant the det charges."

While Jun moved into position Mike and the others used the shadows to get closer. A group of Grunts waddled aimlessly across the bridge while a pair of Jackals seemed to be arguing about something.

Mike stepped out and shredded the lead Grunts with a burst from his MA37. The others scattered in surprise. The militiamen used a hail of fire to take down the Jackals energy shield and drop them as well. Moving swiftly across the bridge the plasma cannons covering the approach cycled up to begin to fire but precise shots from Jun took the gunners down in a matter of seconds. Without supporting fire the humans were able to cover the ground quickly and spread throughout the facility systematically eliminating all resistance. It took only a matter of minutes.

Once secure Jun came trotting across the bridge, sniper rifle slung on his back. Without breaking stride he headed straight to the Covenant pylon and opened his satchel to remove a det charge.

"All clear, Six. This is gonna take a minute, keep your eyes peeled," Jun requested as he deftly prepared the high explosives.

The familiar high-pitched whine of Covenant Phantom dropships could be heard but not seen.

"Inbound, we got inbound!" one of the militiamen called out from an observation post.

"Mike, I need more time!" Jun yelled, despite being on the comms. The intensity of the moment had finally seemed to get to the usually

unflappable sniper. "Keep them off me!"

"Get on the guns," Mike ordered two militiamen who hopped into the seats of the two operational plasma turrets. "Cover the approach. Rest of you, two man teams. Nothing penetrates this perimeter!"

Almost as Mike was giving the orders a massive incendiary charge exploded on their position incinerating one of the militia teams.

Mike swore at himself. "Hunters!" he screamed, "displace, keep moving!"

Two massive Mgalekgolo's lumbered into the lights of the power station leading the way for a Covenant assault team. This time the Hunter's let blast a beam from their Assault Cannons but fortunately the human defenders had moved out of the way.

Mike scanned the terrain for the best way to approach the heavily armored beasts and his eyes came onto another militia fire team. One of humans began to writhe as a plasma sword came protruding through his chest right after an Elite in a purple and black armor array appeared. Another Elite materialized as well dispatching the other unfortunate defender.

"Spec op Elites inside the perimeter!" Mike called urgently. "Wide field of fire. We need to drop their cloaking device. Hose it down. Turrets, plaster the area. Jun, sit rep."

"Almost doneâ€¦.need a few more minutes."

Mike swore again. At this rate they didn't have a few minutes.

Another blast from the Hunters took down another militiaman but then a new sound joined the battle. The steady _pom pom pom_ of the Shade anti-armor cannons. The first gunner was able to zero in on the Elite Spec Ops team that had materialized and catching them in the open punched through their armor then melted them with bolts of magnetically encased plasma. That brought the Covenant momentum to a halt.

The Hunters directed their fire on the Shade obliterating one but the second turret came on-line and punched through the first Hunter's armor shielding causing the wriggling creatures inside to shatter outward, spilling onto the ground. As its mate went berserk with rage Mike by this time had sprinted over and using the beast's anger stuck the Hunter with a captured plasma grenade. The explosion shortly after that ripped the beast's back open allowing Mike to empty a half-clip into its back.

As the Hunter fell dead a second Elite Spec Ops team materialized on Mike's position. He caught the shimmer right before the Sangheili struck so was able to take only a glancing blow from the Plasma Sword. Still, his armor emptied at the blow and the alarm claxon went off. Knowing he was vulnerable instead of moving back to take a shot he pushed forward grabbing the surprised Elite in a bear hug then with a massive burst of strength wrestled the roaring creature right into its companions sword thrust. The Plasma Sword cut through the

Elite's armor and severed its head. Mike then shoved the carcass at the one who'd just killed it, causing the other Elite to stumble. He emptied the rest of the his clip to bring the Spec Op's armor down then moved in to batter the Elite in the face mercilessly with the butt of his assault rifle until it crumpled to the ground dead.

Breathing hard from exertion Mike whirled around in anticipation of attack but found the rest of the assaulting groups support had been taken out by the surviving militiamen and Jun who'd set the charge and gotten back into the action.

"Close call," Jun stated quietly, coming up to Mike.

"Yea, too close," Mike responded, taking his helmet off to wipe sweat from his brow despite the climate control in his armor.

The remainder of the militiamen joined them after sweeping the area clean of any further Covenant. Though their numbers had been thinned out considerably their resolve had only seemed to increase.

"Good job guys," Mike acknowledged. "Thanks for the assist."

"You may be Spartans," the leader of the group stated, "but this is our home and we'll be damned if we give it to these bastards without a fight."

Mike nodded in acknowledgement at the passionate declaration. Nothing more needed to be said.

"We need to keep moving," Jun reminded Mike and the others. Switching channels on his comm he reported, "Recon Bravo to Noble Two, charge placed."

"Somewhere inconspicuous, I hope," Kat responded dryly, not knowing what they'd just gone through.

"Stuck it inside the pylon's power supply," Jun reported.

"Alright. Keep pushing into the dark zone. Command wants to know what the Covenant is hiding," Kat responded.

"There's a gate to the southeast of the power plant," Jun reported after Mike gestured to the best path to keep moving.

Kat paused for a moment as if looking something up. "Copy. Uploading security codes to you now."

"Okay, got 'em. Unlocking the gate," Jun received the uplink then punched a keypad. The large metal door began to slowly open with a rumble as the rest of the humans covered it.

"Recon Bravo, you're heading into the dark zone now," Kat reported.

"What the heck did she think this was?" Jun said incredulously to Mike off-line then responded, "Understood."

The Spartans and remaining militiamen headed through the gate almost immediately running into more Covenant troops. Now able to move

rather than hold a position the humans were able to neutralize the opposition in fairly short order though it did become a bit of a running fight. Not wanting to get bogged down they kept moving further into the mysterious dark zone.

Beyond the growing number of organized ground troops they were encountering there also seemed to be an increase in air traffic overhead. Both of the Spartans got the sense they were getting closer to whatever it was they sought.

Then they saw it.

A Covenant Corvette was holding position on the other side of the rocky wall the humans had advanced towards. The capital ship signaled something of significance was happening in the dark zone and the pylon they'd encountered earlier in the evening was covering it.

"Looks like we found what we're looking for," Mike commented. "Let's call it in."

Jun nodded his head in agreement then opened up his comms. "Noble Two, we have eyes on at least one Covenant ship."

"Solid copy. Don't stop now," Kat responded.

Jun shook his head at the instruction. "Is that woman ever satisfied?"

Mike chuckled and patted the sniper on the back. For the first time since he'd been assigned to Noble Team he felt a connection and affinity with the group. "Come on. Let's wrap this up, we're close," Mike encouraged.

Noble Six was correct in his assessment. Again working together like a finely-tuned machine the Spartans and militia cleared the area of the remaining hostiles affording them the opportunity to do some uninterrupted recon and assess what was around them. There still wasn't anything of significance they'd found beyond the Corvette but the terrain map Mike pulled up on his HUD showed a valley of some form below the vista a bit further along from where they were currently holding up. No further Covenant seemed to be approaching for the time being.

"Stay here and cover the approach," Mike ordered the militiamen. "We're going to go to see if anything's below."

Fanning out, the citizens of Reach formed a defensive zone while Jun and Mike moved up the trail. Before the summit they began to crawl in order to not show a silhouette when they reached the crest. Moving slowly in the shadows the two Spartans arrived at the top.

The sight below took their breath away

A massive Covenant landing zone filled the area ahead of them into the distance. Armor, troop concentrations, anti-aircraft batteries and numerous ships crowded the valley.

"Jackpot," Jun stated without any note of triumph.

"Transmitting visual," Mike commented, blood chilled by the implications of what they were witnessing.

"You seeing this, Kat?" Jun asked.

"Confirmed," Kat responded over the comms. "Receiving Noble Three and Noble Six's live visual of a Covenant strike force."

"That's no strike force, it's an invading army," Jun declared emphatically. "If we're gonna smother this thing, we need to go in hard and fast."

"Agreed. All recon teams disengage and fall back. Sun will be up in a few hours...and it's going to be a very busy day," Kat declared grimly.

Mike and Jun crawled back to where the militiamen were waiting.

"What did you find?" the bearded leader of the group asked.

"Nothing good," Jun stated, taking his helmet off and rolling his head around to relieve the built up tension.

The militiamen noted the action and began to fidget.

"You've got to clear this area," Mike stated emphatically. "Covenant have an invasion force in the valley. When they roll out of here they'll smash everything in their path."

"Our homes—our families—," one man choked out.

"Get them out," Mike cut him off. "Take the weapons and munitions you've got stashed at the pumping station but get out of this territory, all hell is about to be unleashed."

13. Chapter 13

****Chapter 13****

****August 12, 2552 08:00 Hours, Szurdok Ridge, Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

The large dust cloud could be seen from a distance even before the roar of engines straining towards their objective overpowered the clear morning. There was no stealth in this; the approaching convoy could be seen from kilometers away. Scorpion Main Battle Tanks, Warthogs and Mongoose All-Terrain Vehicles charged towards the Covenant staging area Mike and Jun had discovered the previous evening. The concerted response of the defenders of Reach to the invasion finally seemed to be happening.

Flying overhead, Commander Carter had to admit it was an impressive sight. Despite his natural cynicism after years of hard fighting he allowed himself the thrill of the moment as he watched the disciplined formation below charging towards the waiting Covenant. It took him back to his days as a boy, before he became a Spartan, before he had the weight of command placed on his shoulders as a teenager and he savored the moment. The thrilling sight reminded him

of the cavalry charges he'd heard about and seen in pictures from hundreds of years ago when men on horseback advanced to combat in this fashion.

The reflective Spartan thought that while technology had changed the problems mankind faced hadn't. There'd been wars and rumor of wars back then just as there was now. For all of their technological advancement, for their ability to colonize planets billions of light years from earth, they still hadn't figured out how to live in peace together. Before the Covenant was the human insurrection that would likely boil over again if they defeated the alien invaders.

No, little had changed since men had beaten each other to death with stone clubs for water holes. It seemed to be an ingrained nature they'd never overcome on their own. Wars of conquest had been going on from the beginning of time despite every attempt at understanding, education and tolerance whether it was a war for the playground equipment in the school yard, for a worthless boyfriend among teenage girls or nations fighting each other over ideology.

Carter shook his head and couldn't help but smile. He'd never considered himself a philosopher but then perhaps he'd never had the time. Seeing the rapidly approaching ridge line to their front he knew his time for this type of luxury was up. The Covenant had not simply glassed Reach and moved on. They wanted to conquer it and hold it. That allowed the human defenders the chance to fight for it.

And fight they were going to.

Opening up the team communications channel the leader of Noble Team said, "Okay Auntie Dot, give us a sit-rep."

The pleasant voice of the team's intelligence support and liaison AI responded, "It appears that Noble Team's discovery last night was not an anomaly. Large Covenant deployments have occurred undetected, and we are now under attack across the Viery territory, including orbital defenses. As per the Winter Contingency, we are countering on every front. Noble's reconnaissance has also identified sophisticated Covenant army hiding canopies, and has been pinpointed what's believed to be a landing zone for additional Covenant forces, the origin of which is yet to be determined."

Listening to the report the leader of Noble Team looked down from his vantage point in the Falcon above watching Kat driving one of the lead Warthogs below with Mike riding shotgun. Jun, Emile and Jorge travelled together in another Hog to their right while Natalia rode shotgun in one to the left. Noble Team was back in the fight and this time were moving in force. It was an impressive task force HIGHCOMM had put together to unseat the Covenant from the area. The invaders seemed to want to conquer this region so this was one where the humans felt they could make a stand and fight back. In order to do that though they needed to not only take out the Covenant forces but more importantly where they were coming in.

Watching the Warthogs and other vehicles charging towards the Covenant position Commander Carter couldn't help but think of a poem from ancient times called 'Charge of the Light Brigade'. He hoped the outcome would be different. Opening the team channel the leader of Noble Team declared, "That landing zone has been tagged by UNSC command as a Priority One target."

But first the dark zone shrouding the area needed to be removed for a concerted attack from the ground and above to be successful. That would be the first order of business then the UNSC forces would attack the landing area en masse. That meant the Covenant pylon generating it needed to be taken out.

"Det-charge link is loud and clear!" Jun reported, checking to ensure he was able to pick up the signal from the ordinance he'd planted the previous evening.

"Copy that," Kat acknowledged looking over to Mike and giving him a thumbs up sign as she prepared to blow the structure that was creating the dark zone. "Acquiring signal lock on the pylon. Detonating in three, two, one."

To their right and on the ridge line bracketing the plain the UNSC force was charging along an orange ball exploded into the morning sky. The pylon crumpled in response and all along the line Noble Team's and every other sensor array came alive with red dots as the dark zone ceased.

If that was good news no one was cheering.

As if on signal waves of Covenant Banshee fighters came swooping down on the convoy opening fire in concert with a salvo of plasma rounds coming in from Wraiths lobbing them in from the distance. It appeared the Covenant were not impressed by the aligned human firepower and intended on holding the landing zone. M41 Vulcan LAAG gunners on the Warthogs retaliated, opening fire on the swooping Banshees.

The Covenant had the area zeroed for their Wraiths as more mortar rounds screamed in, several finding their marks. Warthogs and Mongooses began to fly through the air from direct hits creating havoc in the movement discipline of the column. Vehicles began to juke wildly about to get out of the arc of incoming fire while still trying to avoid the Banshees diving hungrily down from the sky looking for victims.

The avenues of advance broken, drivers moved on instinct. Two Warthogs turned into each other, crashing, while a Mongoose was crushed when it got in the way of a charging Scorpion Main Battle Tank. The UNSC air cover of Pelicans and Falcons did their best to provide support from above but were no match for the nimble Banshees who shot down two Falcons in the process.

Oblivious to all this, Kat dodged mortar rounds left and right, whooping like a madwoman from excitement and adrenaline. Seeing their objective the female Spartan turned towards a bridge which was the key structure in crossing a deep chasm separating the plain. The UNSC needed to take and hold the bridge for the main force to cross and retake the Covenant landing field. Kat and Mike were now in the lead echelon, engine roaring at full throttle trying to make it to the bridge. Only meters away as Mike watched the lead group of vehicles begin to cross over he looked up and saw a plasma mortar round reach the top of its arc and begin to fall towards the center of the bridge. It seems they had that zeroed too.

"Incoming!" Mike yelled too late for Kat to swerve from the course.

The plasma splash hit perfectly in the center of the bridge. With a dull _thud_ the round exploded dropping the center of the structure down to the bottom of the chasm.

"Might want to hold onto something!" Kat grunted as she floored the accelerator to try to jump the gap.

The Warthog took off sailing through the air but the gap of the now-destroyed bridge was too wide so the heavy vehicle came down nose first. Hitting hard it bounced wildly before turning on its side spilling the passengers out onto the rocky terrain. While Kat and Mike's MJOLINIR armor absorbed much of the shock the Army trooper manning the LAAG on the rear hit hard enough to snap his neck.

Despite the armor, Mike hit the ground head-first. Even though his Mk.V[B] helmet absorbed much of the blow the Spartan was still knocked momentarily senseless. Coming too he found himself lying face down.

"Six! Can you hear me?" Kat called out urgently racing over to his side. "Six, you alright?" Seeing Mike begin to slowly move her concern turned to action. "I could use some help!"

Covenant infantry began swarming over a rise to the bridge approach while a Spirit dropship inserted more troops. A fresh wave of Banshees screamed overhead strafing the area. Seeing the threat Kat moved to an overturned Warthog and began to return fire.

"On my way," Mike responded.

Spotting a M41 Rocket Launcher that had fallen out of a broken weapon case on the ground the Spartan grabbed it and prepared to follow Noble Two into the fray when his eyes caught another Warthog trying to jump the gap.

At the last moment the driver panicked and tried to pull back rather than accelerate over the gap. It failed, instead slamming into the side of the destroyed bridge sending its screaming crew into the abyss. Mike turned but realized the passenger in the ill-fated Hog had been catapulted out of the seat and sent flying through the air landing with a sickening thud on the remnant of the bridge.

The red MJOLINIR armor could only be one person: Natalia.

The woman lay motionless on the ground beside an overturned Warthog whose driver's headless body hung suspended in the seat. Caught off guard and still foggy from his own collision something snapped in Mike's mind. The brooding Spartan was taken to another place at another time. Sprinting towards Natalia, instead of being on Reach he was in the middle of Operation Torpedo though he'd never been there.

"Melanie! Mel!" Mike screamed, "Wake up," seeing the woman from his past whose face still tormented him. "Don't die Melanie, please!"

Despite the din of battle all was silent for him as he dropped down to the ground beside the limp form.

Ears ringing from the force of the collision, Natalia groaned and her eyes fluttered. Her eyes needed to adjust as everything seemed fuzzy. Before she could focus she knew Mike was kneeling over her. The woman had no fear of death if this was what was happening. Something inside though said it wasn't her time, she had more to live, and now more to live for. Despite the pain from being thrown from the Warthog she shouldn't help but smile since Mike had come to her in the middle of the critical battle.

Then her head cleared and she heard Mike calling out the name of another woman.

"Who's Melanie?" Natalia asked weakly.

"What?" Mike snapped out of his fog. "What did you say?" he responded, now back in real-time.

"Nothing," Melanie answered, knowing this wasn't the time. "Am I going to die?" Her emotions were churning at that moment and perhaps death would be a blessing. She was happy that he'd come to her in the midst of the fight but sad that it appeared as if he was coming for another and not her.

Mike pulled up the reading of the woman's vitals on his HUD and did a quick scan. "No, you look good." He sounded relieved which counted for something. "You'll likely have a nasty headache but your suit absorbed most of the crash. Come on," he held out a hand, "we need to get back into the fight."

We. That counted for something.

Charging up the rise Natalia travelled in Mike's wake. The Spartan fired and moved, cutting a path through the swarming Covenant towards where Kat was pinned down.

As Mike moved towards his stalled friend Natalia's comment to him as she came out of unconsciousness weighed heavy: _Who's Melanie?..._ Had he really called her that? Everything had happened so quickly and the woman had been lying on the ground motionless. Maybe he had. Was he starting to see the two women on the same level? Was he starting to care? All he did know right now was the sudden rush of fear that overcame him when he saw the prostrate woman. It wasn't a fear as in panic; it was a fear as in loss.

There was no time for deep, philosophical thought.

Mike saw two Banshees push up high into the sky then loop 180 degrees to drop straight down towards the ground, vapor trails forming a ribbon behind them. They were dropping down on Kat's position. Noble Two couldn't move. Fuel rod rounds were slamming in to the woman's left and a concentration of Elites held in her check to the right. With the Banshees coming in overhead she was about to be finished.

"Kat you've got to displace!" Mike yelled over the comms. "You've got two inbound bandits coming down overhead."

Kat looked up and swore at the sight then declared, "I can't move Six. Bastards got me pinned down."

Mike hadn't paused in the interim, deftly flipping the jackhammer rocket launcher he carried he began to prep to use it. At the same time he ordered, "Kat, make your way to the right. I'll clear the way. Natalia, break right too, support Kat. Both of you move to the rocky area next to the abutment. I'll meet you there."

Natalia moved out of Mike's wake instantly, opening fire on a pair of Elites preparing to attack, disrupting their attempt to intercept Kat as she stepped out of cover. Continuing to move forward she walked fire from her assault rifle over to support Kat as she engaged those who tried to intercept her. Seconds after Noble Two had moved away from the cover of the overturned Warthog the Banshees leveled it with fire from their twin plasma cannons. If Kat had been there she would have been incinerated.

The two women worked in concert, moving seamlessly, pushing back the Covenant array up and beyond the peak of the hill they'd been charging over.

"Kat, Six, what's your status?" Commander Carter interrupted from his perch overhead, seeking to get a sense of what was going on since the battle had now broken into a series of running skirmishes.

"Pylons are down," Kat reported, "we're pushing up the hill."

"Roger that. Take the hill and consolidate," Carter ordered. "We're getting too strung out so we need to reform before we proceed."

Noble One saw a green acknowledgement light wink in his HUD letting him know Kat had received the order. Satisfied that part of the attack was fine he concentrated on the rest of the team. Jorge was supporting an engineer company with covering fire from his HMG who were seeking to place bridging equipment in place to cross the chasm leading to the valley and bring the rest of their forces to bear. Emile was moving among the engineers protecting them from swarming Grunts and Jackals seeking to disrupt the activities. Jun had found a place of cover on a rocky rise. Tucking himself into the shadows he began to seek targets of opportunity. Of particular interest were a group of Elite Zealots exhorting on the Covenant defenders in the area. Patiently waiting for good opportunities despite the chaos around him, the efficient sniper systematically eliminated four of the dangerous foes with precise head shots.

Despite the efforts of Noble team the attempt to bridge the abyss was at a standstill. Plasma mortar rounds began to fall among the engineers, searing a team and their equipment.

"Noble Lead, we got a Wraith somewhere frying this place up," Jun called into the comms from his perch. "Need some air support now or we're not going to get across this gap."

"Roger that," Commander Carter acknowledged, "Delta 3-13," he called over to a circling Pelican, "seek and eliminate hostile armor elements blocking our bridging efforts. This is priority one."

The Pelican roared in from the sky and quickly found the distinctive Wraith mortar tank tucked behind a low rise not far from the destroyed bridge. The Covenant had foolishly not supported their

mobile artillery platform with any anti-air assets so the gunners could only watch in horror as the winged UNSC avenger slammed the tank with high explosive missiles from its Anvil-II air-to-surface pods.

The artillery threat had been eliminated but the UNSC had to get the bridging equipment in place to replace the crossings the Covenant had wisely destroyed at the beginning of the attack or the human's assault would stall before it really had the chance to begin.

Mike was too busy to respond and didn't have time to think of what the rest of Noble team was up to. The Spartan found out the fuel rod rounds turned out to be from a Shade turret. One roared in, knocking him flying as it came in too close. His shield drained to half level but the Spartan rolled and in one motion was back on his feet starting to zigzag so the tracking turret couldn't zero on him. Finding a small cluster of rocks he dove behind them as another blast from the turret sought to incinerate him. Adjusting the jackhammer, Mike popped up with his eye in the targeting sight as he brought it up to his shoulder. In one smooth motion he squeezed the trigger. He felt the weapon buck as the 102mm high explosive round released from the launcher with a _whoosh. _A millisecond later the round slammed into the turret turning it into a ball of flames. Mike was on his feet and sprinting up the slope, supporting Kat and Natalia's attempt to find a new place of cover.

A plasma round splashed beside the spot Mike had just moved from, turning the ground into a charred mess. One of the two Banshees that had destroyed the Warthog Kat had hid behind had turned on him as its next target. The winged fighter swooped up and right, seeking to reset for another attack run. Mike took the opportunity to bring the rocket launcher to bear on the dangerous fighter. Ignoring several Needler rounds impacting on his armor he allowed the targeting system of the smart-linked sight to track the looping Banshee until he heard the satisfying tone of a successful lock. Pulling the trigger he began to get back into the fight knowing the aerial threat was about to be eliminated.

He was correct.

A few seconds later he heard the sound of an explosion overhead and knew the Banshee was gone. That threat eliminated Mike began to work his way to the right to link up with Kat and Natalia. The pair had linked up and pushed up to the summit of the hill but were tied down by another Shade turret.

Kat swore as again a Fuel Rod round slammed into the rock protrusion the two women were holding cover behind. Bits of rock chipped from the solid surface pinged against their armor, more of an irritant than a threat. So intent was the aggressive Spartan to push forward that she missed the Elite emerging on her flank. Too late she saw the Sangheili level his plasma rifle and open fire. The plasma rounds were dead on, draining her shield. Natalia though had caught the threat and had already lobbed a fragmentation grenade at the distracted Covenant warrior. It impacted at the Elite's feet just as it was ready to finish Kat off. Natalia stayed focused and followed up the grenade which had taken down the Elite's shield with a stream of fire from her assault rifle punching through the blue armor and ripping open its chest.

"Thanks," Kat grunted with a note of surprise that the ONI officer she had consistently chided had helped her out.

"No problem," Natalia nodded expertly slapping a fresh mag into her MA37.

Any conversation was cut short by a wave of Grunts who came screaming over the top in an attempt to overwhelm them. Two suicide Grunts carrying primed plasma grenades led the way warbling crazily. Kat drilled the first one and Natalia the second. Their explosive charges went off prematurely shredding the group surrounding the pair. That allowed the two members of Noble team to bring more fire to bear and slow the charge. An added chorus of human fire was added to the symphony as Mike came charging in to join the stalled pair.

"Good to see you Six," Kat commented.

Natalia nodded her head vigorously in agreement but didn't say anything, the adrenaline of the moment causing her not to trust what she'd say or do.

"Sitrep?" Mike asked, getting down to business.

"Bloody Shade's got us pinned down here," Kat declared. "We can't take the summit with it there."

Mike checked the rocket launcher he carried since that was the natural solution to the dangerous anti-infantry gun that commanded the summit but the weapon was empty. Throwing it aside he made a quick sweep of the area to get an assessment. Other than a few Jackals sniping away there seemed to be a lull in infantry action giving them an opportunity.

"Okay, I'll move up and right and draw the turret's fire," Mike began, "you two move back and left behind that big rock to flank the gun then take it out."

"That's going to leave you pretty exposed while we do it," Kat countered.

"I'll be fine. My armor can handle it," Mike countered.

"Man, that's a Fuel Rod up there," the aggressive female Spartan declared, showing concern for Mike. "One hit will take your shields down. You can't let there be a second or you're done."

Natalia gulped audibly at the declaration she hadn't thought of. She reached out to grab Mike's arm but stopped herself halfway looking instead like a school child trying to raise her hand to ask a question.

Mike caught the gesture. "What's up?" he asked, missing the intent.

"Nothing," Natalia mumbled in embarrassment. Then, instead of moving her concern overwhelmed her. "Just be careful, okay?"

Rather than chide her for the unnecessary comment in the middle of a combat situation he replied quietly, "I will," vigorously nodding his head. "Okay, let's move."

Mike sprinted forward towards the exposed summit, drawing fire immediately but he dodged crazily around.

The two women began to move into their position but Kat grabbed Natalia's arm first. "You like him, don't you?" Then, seeming to not want to hear a reply pulled her with her and added, "Come on!"

Mike's prediction was correct. The sight of the charging Spartan transfixed the gunner on the Shade who focused on taking down the armored super soldier. Kat and Natalia dropped several Jackals along the way but didn't slow their pace. As they moved closer to engage the Covenant turret Natalia couldn't help but admire Mike anew as he bobbed and weaved around, fearlessly exposing himself to the enemy fire to allow them a shot. It was yet another unrecorded act of bravery the galaxy would never know about, yet another example of a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good.

The quick woman's mind could process the needs of the battle and ponder this at the same time. She'd been so selfish, so ambition, so unaware of what these soldiers were doing for mankind. Deemed expendable, 'acceptable casualties', and on and on by ONI command and others. Yet charging to attack with Kat and watching Mike risk himself so the stalled attack could carry on made her ashamed to be part of such a group. Yes, she liked him, she thought to herself silently in response to Kat's question, she likely even was falling in love with him, but this was a different feeling. This was an admiration for the nobility of these Spartans and what they were willing to go through for the good of their species. Then it struck her:

Noble team.

An ironic and appropriate name. They were noble, even Emile in his own way. Right there, Natalia Misriah vowed if she ever got off this rock she'd do whatever she could to advocate for these misunderstood men and women and ensure they received better treatment than they had before. That gave her yet another reason to live.

Natalia thought all these things while simultaneously finding the opening in a Jackal's shield to drop the pesky creature with a burst of automatic rifle fire.

Kat had switched to her M6 Magnum pistol in order to have a more precise shot on the Shade gunner as they got within range. The Grunt manning it finally saw Mike was a ruse and desperately attempted to traverse the gun towards the real threat.

It was too late.

In quick succession Kat popped off three rounds all which found its mark and the Shade went silent.

Without the turret anchoring their defensive line the Covenant forces holding the top of the ridge crumbled. The force of the two Spartans supported by Natalia in addition to a contingency of UNSC troops who had rallied pushed them off the position. Retreating in disarray the Covenant ceded the key area allowing the humans to gain a foothold. A bonus of the turrets being taken out was that Pelicans could swoop in

and drop several Warthogs to provide added firepower. With all of this a force held the ridge while another moved back to eliminate any remaining enemy seeking to block the attempt to cross the deep chasm.

While this was going on the UNSC Army engineers had brought up the bridging equipment. Now not being harassed by Covenant fire they were able to lay not just one bridge to cross the abyss but two. With UNSC forces on the other side covering the exit and the approach fully secure the flow of equipment and men could resume. First across was a squadron of Scorpion main battle tanks then a long line of troop transport. The assault on the Szurdok Ridge was back in business.

14. Chapter 14

****Chapter 14****

****0912 August 12, 2552 Szurdok Ridge, Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

As UNSC forces rumbled past their forward position pushing through to engage the retreating Covenant, Mike had the opportunity for a breather. Taking off his helmet he looked around, surveying the carnage. Bodies littered the approach to the crest of the hill along with burned-out equipment. Carrion birds were already circling, eagerly awaiting the opportunity for a meal. No matter the destruction someone, or something, always seemed to be able to profit from another's misery. The Spartan watched Kat and Natalia as he walked towards them, conscious of the fact they appeared to actually be having a conversation.

For their part the two women, who had also taken off their helmets, were going over the previous skirmish.

"Good job covering me Misriah," Kat stated somewhat grudgingly.
"Thanks for that."

"You're welcome," Natalia responded, then taking a risk added, "It was a tough fight."

"More than you're used to I bet?" Kat probed to see how the privileged woman would respond.

"That's for sure. We all know I'm in way over my head," Natalia confirmed, averting eye contact. Then voice dropping she added, "Does it ever get easier?"

"Naw," Kat responded, grudgingly having to admire the pluck of the woman who doggedly continued to fight despite everything, "you just learn to keep ahead of the rolling boulder so you don't get crushed." The judgmental Spartan looked at the woman from ONI with different eyes and saw someone who genuinely was trying to contribute. Maybe Mike was right after all. "You get used to it."

The conversation of the two women took a pause as each watched Mike who'd stopped and was obliviously conferring with a Marine Sergeant leading a section of troops setting up a defensive position to secure the bridge head.

In that moment Natalia took perhaps one of the greatest risks of her life. "I do, you know," she said to Kat.

"You do what?" Kat shook her head in confusion.

"I do like him, Mike," Natalia answered, "to answer your question from earlier." The woman had never made herself vulnerable like that before. Always she'd been in control, with others confessing to her. Never had she stepped out on a limb and actually declared her real feelings. The action both terrified and exhilarated her

Kat snorted then her eyes narrowed. She scratched her closely shorn hair then she nodded her head. "He'd be a good catch if you could get him."

"Thanks," Natalia said almost breathlessly at the implied endorsement.

"And if he lived long enough," the Spartan added fatalistically.

Mike walked over to the two women unaware of their conversation. Natalia's face reddened and Kat smirked knowingly causing confusion for the naïve man.

"What?" Mike asked, unsure what to say. He had a feeling it had to do with him but couldn't figure it out. The scene became suddenly awkward. Thankfully the war interceded to extricate them from the emotional entanglement.

"Six, be advised: ONI has identified 2 hostile anti-aircraft guns southwest of your location," Commander Carter cut in from his position circling above.

A bit muddled by the looks he continued to get from the two women Mike paused.

Still smirking at Natalia then shifting her gaze to a still-confused Mike Kat popped her helmet back on. "Copy, Commander," she jumped in, confirming the assignment. "New target, Six. Shut down those AA guns. Commandeer that Warthog, get us there in one piece."

Co-ordinates popped up on Mike and Kat's HUD as the Lone Wolf went over to speak to the driver of a nearby Rocket Warthog. Jumping into the driver seat he revved the engine and then allowed it to idle as Noble Two began to make her way over. Natalia was left standing by herself, not being given any orders by the commander of Noble Team.

Kat hopped up onto the back and into the gunner's position. Deftly opening up the fire control system for the twin M79 MLRS the hydraulics whined as the Multiple Launch Rocket System came to life. She paused and called back to Natalia, "Misriah, you might as well come along too," Kat said, pointing to the side seat.

Overjoyed at the invitation, Natalia sprinted over to the waiting vehicle not seeing a rock so tripping along the way and almost falling down. Cursing herself silently for being so clumsy she heard Kat chuckle over the comms.

Mike looked back at Kat at the invitation but the enigmatic Spartan said nothing to him, looking straight ahead. Natalia sat down in the passenger seat and fumbled with her assault rifle. Confused still but strangely happy to have Natalia along he sat there for a moment soaking it in.

"You waiting for Christmas, Six?" Kat chided him from behind.

Shaken from the moment, Mike threw the Hog into drive and they sped off towards the co-ordinates of the AA guns they needed to take out.

Instead of moving to the left where the UNSC troops were massing to engage the Covenant forces in an open plain the trio from Noble Team headed right towards a narrow ravine cut through the rocky expanse of the ridge. Moving as quickly as they could along the dirt trail the Warthog bounced around despite the heavy-duty shocks it had. Covering the distance to the objective quickly, the trail took them up the ridge to a plateau. Before they reached the summit the top of the Covenant AA gun became visible.

"Noble Lead, we've reached the objective," Mike reported.

"Six, AA guns should be in visual range," Commander Carter reported.

"Roger that," Mike confirmed, looking at the 2 ½ story tall gun emplacement. The battery had a circular base for a small command center housing the power unit for the weapon system then rose from the unit itself which sat on a carriage capable of rotating 360 degrees. The gun barrel consisted of two long projectiles with almost serrated teeth that looked like the mouth of a hungry barracuda opening up to consume a victim with its dangerous bolts of superheated high-velocity plasmas. As the Spartan watched a deadly three round salvo was sent hurtling up into the sky.

"2 Lima 4 to Noble One," a new voice cut in on the team's channel, "those guns are pounding us with high-velocity plasma shells!"

"Which would mean a strike by the Frigate Grafton is also out of the question," Auntie Dot the team's AI stated, confirming the call sign as that of a UNSC frigate waiting above to support the ground assault.

Mike looked to his left as the Warthog cleared the canyon walls and could see a fierce battle developing on the plain below the plateau. UNSC forces were being overwhelmed by a Covenant force. Three massive Covenant Scarabs engaged the human force of Warthogs, Scorpions and ground troops. Supporting the dead insect-shaped heavy assault platforms were multiple Ghosts, Wraiths, and Banshees. Mike thought he could pick out the distinct helmet of Emile riding shotgun on one of the Scorpions, fighting like mad to keep the swarming Covenant off the critical piece of equipment. It seemed like the rest of Noble Team was already in the fight.

Without air support the human counter attack would stall before it even got off the ground.

"Noble Six, all our birds are stuck out of range unless you can do something about those guns," Commander Carter ordered.

"Affirmative, we're on it," Mike confirmed as the Warthog cleared the trail and broke into the open on the plateau.

The Covenant forces guarding the anti-aircraft platform responded to the threat with small arms fire, the air filling with hissing plasma bolts and sizzling Needler rounds. Kat responded with a salvo of 65mm Argent V missiles from the twin MLRSs cutting a path for the charging Warthog. More Covenant troops came swarming up and over the scattered rocks of the plateau to protect the gun platform. Mike cranked the Hog on a crazy circuitous route as he continued to try to follow the trail up the rise to the high ground the gun sat on. Natalia bounced around in the passenger seat but despite teeth-jarring jolts maintained a steady rate of fire with her assault rifle.

The three members of Noble Team moved steadily clockwise towards the top while below them the battle raged and increased in intensity. Clearing a rocky abutment Mike could see an opening to the AA battery and headed towards it. Too late he spied an Elite level a plasma launcher and unleash two deadly plasma bolts towards them. He had no room to maneuver so yelled out, "Hang on, we're going for a tumble!"

The armored vehicle absorbed the first bolt stopping it dead in its tracks while the second caused the heavy vehicle to flip over wildly. Mike hung onto the wheel and Natalia grabbed the dashboard while Kat nimbly did a back flip off the end despite her bulky armor. Natalia couldn't hold on so was thrown roughly out the side of the vehicle.

The MLRS acted as a canopy and so the Warthog flipped over entirely and landed back with a bounce on its heavy duty tires.

The Elite moved in to take another shot at the stopped vehicle but Natalia scrambled to her feet and drilled the distracted Sangheili with a burst of high velocity rounds from her assault rifle. Kat by this point had jumped back into the gunner's position and had begun laying rockets across the front of the opening in a tight spread pattern.

"Six, go for the gun's control. We'll cover you," Kat called out.

Mike jumped out of the driver's seat and ran towards the opening despite surging covenant around him. Plasma rounds exploded all around the Spartan as Grunts poured out to stop him.

Distracted, Mike didn't see a golden armored Elite step out of the command center with a Needler Rifle.

"Mike, watch out!" Natalia screamed in warning.

"Six, you got a General on you!" Kat added simultaneously.

Mike turned in time to see the deadly Elite General open fire on him. Several rounds impacted draining his already depleted shield but the warning had allowed him to dodge to the side and miss the brunt of the surprise attack. He opened up with his assault rifle but the

Sangheili's enhanced shielding easily turned aside the slugs harmlessly. Knowing he didn't have the firepower to punch through the attacker's armor he moved swiftly inside the Elite's cone of fire, drawing fire from the other Covenant forces. Several stray rounds impacted the General allowing Mike to press in and beat away with the butt of his assault rifle. The Sangheili roared out a warrior's challenge, moving to activate its Energy Sword. Mike dropped his assault rifle during the tussle but in one smooth motion he pulled his M6G Magnum out of its holster and in quick succession let loose six rounds of 30mm SAP-HE rounds. That was more than even the General's enhanced shielding could handle. The last two rounds punched through the dangerous Sangheili's midsection shredding vital organs.

The Elite General crumpled to the ground causing the remaining Grunts to run away in panic. Mike had a clear run to the inside of the gun platform.

A deafening salvo from the AA gun happened at the same time causing Mike's ears to ring despite the sound microprocessors in his helmet. Shaking his head to clear it he looked and saw in the center the glass-encased power core. The Lone Wolf fired a burst from his assault rifle but the rounds bounced harmlessly off the reinforced glass. A fragmentation grenade did no better and Mike wondered for a moment what to do. Then, spotting a fallen Grunt in the doorway he had an idea. Grabbing two Plasma Grenades he moved to the edge of the glass, primed them and then stuck them at the base. Both went off within a nanosecond of each other, causing the glass to turn brittle and then shatter.

The power unit's purplish-pink energy source pulsed and surged. The energy of it could be felt now that the shielding was down. Taking a fragmentation grenade Mike threw it into the opening. On explosion the power source flared and changed color. Immediately an alarm claxon went off, warning of a power overload. Realizing the chain reaction he'd set off Mike sprinted out of the command center of the AA battery just as the power core overloaded. A white flash then a booming explosion went off throwing the Spartan off his feet.

The battery went silent.

"Control, 2 Lima 4," the ship's commander called, reading from above on sensor the drop in power level of the anti-aircraft gun, "permission to commence bombing runs, heading 224.6, over."

Commander Carter, observing from nearby saw the gun battery wilt and the lights go dark. "Good work, Noble Six. UNSC air support: skies are clear," he confirmed

"Copy. 2 Lima 4, bombing run, heading 224.6, permission granted," the UNSC area air controller confirmed for all air assets in the territory.

In response three Longswords moved in tentatively seeking to support the ground assault followed by two heavy frigates, the UNSC Grafton and the UNSC Saratoga. Unsure of the second battery they held back without fully committing.

It was fortunate for the Frigates they did.

Blue plasma rounds hissed up angrily into the air as the second Covenant AA battery opened fire, taking down two Longswords. The third veered off sharply. The two Frigates pulled up as quickly as they could from their descent but not before another salvo shot up, clipping the Saratoga. Fortunately the ship's navigator had a quick hand or they wouldn't have escaped with only minor structural damage.

"Control, 2 Lima 4," the Grafton called urgently. "The areas too hot, we're pulling off and holding back on station. It's too risky for us to fly close support! Request permission to engage from orbit using MAC rounds."

"Negative 2 Lima 4," the ground controller refused the request. "Too many friendlies for a Danger Close fire mission."

The commander of 2 Lima 4 swore over the open channel, a breach of protocol, but the intensity of the situation ensured no one even thought about it.

"Noble Lead," the area commander called to Commander Carter, "we need that gun down or we'll have to pull back off the plain."

"Six, Kat, we got to get rid of that second battery! Find it and take it out!" Commander Carter ordered.

Remounting the Rocket Warthog, the trio found the going much harder than the trip to the first battery. A bridge had been destroyed so they needed the assistance of a Pelican bringing a mobile bridge. The pause allowed Covenant forces in the area to swarm the lone vehicle and its occupants. While Kat stayed in the gunner's position to fire at concentrating attackers with the MLRS Mike and Natalia bailed out and systematically eliminated any who got too close to their position on high ground. Though it seemed like hours it was a short time before the bridging equipment arrived and they were back on the road. Unfortunately for the members of Noble Team the delay had caused them to not only lose momentum but also allowed all along the trail a variety of Covenant forces to set up in an attempt to stop the charging Warthog.

Mike kept the heavy vehicle floored, bumping and juking crazily along to not allow an easy target while Kat cut a path for them with the Argent missiles peppering their front from their multiple rocket pods.

By the time they arrived at the second AA gun the Covenant had seemed to clue into the human's strategy so the defenders were bolstered by two Wraith tanks and a pair of armored Hunters. Attempting to utilize the strategy of fire-and-movement that they'd done the last time Mike circled the structure seeking to allow Kat to blast away with the rocket launcher while Natalia sought to pick off targets of opportunity with her assault rifle. Though they thinned out the force and took out one of the Wraiths the Covenant forces successfully were able to block them from approaching the command center of the anti-air battery.

Commander Carter, though having to stay off station due to the lack of security in the skies, could watch the battle unfolding through his team member's helmet cams. While he had confidence that given

time the trio would punch through time was something they didn't have. The UNSC attack on the plains was not only stalled it was beginning to be pushed back by the combined firepower of Covenant air and ground assets. They needed to clear the skies and do it now. Scrolling through a list of resources the commander of Noble Team called up a reserve Quick Reaction Force and using his authority from Colonel Holland ordered them in to back up the members of Noble Team.

To Mike's pleasant surprise a Pelican swooped in despite hot ground fire to drop off a squad of troopers to assist them. The added firepower did the trick and in short order they were able to approach the entry gangway to the AA gun's power core. Having taken out the first one Mike knew how to quickly disable this one. So again using grenades to shatter the casing he then blasted the power core setting off a chain reaction that disabled the dangerous battery. With a satisfying explosion the Covenant AA gun went silent. The skies were clear.

From the control bridge of the circling Frigate in outer space a weapon's officer saw the power level drop then go cold from the remaining Covenant AA battery on her view screen. With a whoop of delight that the ship's commander let pass she informed them the gun that had kept them at bay was down.

"2 Lima 4 you're good to go, all AA guns neutralized," Mike confirmed.

"Thanks Noble Six," the Grafton declared, "couldn't have done it without you."

"Happy hunting," Mike ignored the compliment, "clear the way for the ground pounders."

The Frigates flew back in aggressively this time opening fire on the fully exposed Covenant forces in the valley. As 2 Lima 4 commenced a bombing run on the three Scarabs two of them were destroyed outright. The third tried to lumber away futilely and was disabled by fire from the forces on the ground, grinding to a halt.

Without the heavy armor support the UNSC forces were able to rally and punch through the Covenant defenders opening up the front for a continued advance. They were back in business.

Mike, Kat and Natalia watched all this unfold from their perch on the plateau above enjoying the opportunity for a breather after the intense running battle.

It was short lived.

"Well done, Six," Commander Carter cut in on the team comm from his perch overhead. Now that the skies were clear his Falcon could rejoin the ongoing operation and he could resume his role of command-and-control. "ONI needs up-close recon on those Spires, we're gonna fly you the rest of the way. Jorge has a Falcon inbound to your position. Lieutenant, highlighting the LZ now."

A navpoint appeared on Mike's HUD as the sound of the inbound Falcon signaled not only the imminence of the arrival but the urgency of the new assignment.

"Commander, I'm going to set up a forward observation post here," Kat reported to Noble Lead. With the nature of the running battle the quick-thinking Spartan saw an opportunity to be useful until a new assignment arose.

"Copy that, I'm waiting on new Intel. See what you can see, Carter out."

With a rare moment that held no sense of urgency for her Kat relaxed. "Pretty nice sight, huh?" the often volatile Spartan declared to Natalia while clapping Mike on the back as the third Scarab exploded in a massive fireball. "Bet you'd never get to see something like that back at Bravo Six," Kat stated in reference to ONI headquarters on Earth.

Taking off her helmet Natalia shook out her luxurious blond hair, the sunlight of midday seemed to cause the red streaks in it to glimmer or maybe it was the sense of exhilaration she felt. Regardless, the woman whose life had changed so much in the past few weeks spoke to Kat but looked straight into Mike's visor. "I wouldn't have missed this for the whole world."

Kat snorted and shook her head in disbelief. "You are something lady, that's for sure." Moving back towards the destroyed AA battery she turned back and added, "We might just make a soldier out of you yet!"

Natalia beamed at the compliment, unable to hide her emotions. Then she saw Mike nod his head noticeably in agreement causing her eyes to get glassy.

Mike caught the exchange, giving him pause for thought. He knew what it felt like to be an outsider seeking to break in. It was time for a change in the team's dynamics.

"Come on Noble Seven," Mike declared, patting her on the back, "let's finish this job."

Eyes welling over in open tears, Natalia didn't care who saw her response to Mike's affirmation. At least in his eyes, she was now a member of Noble Team.

15. Chapter 15

****Chapter 15****

****1247 August 12, 2552 Szurdok Ridge, Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

The twin rotors of the Falcon kicked up a hurricane of dirt as it landed causing the UNSC troopers guarding the perimeter of the destroyed AA battery to shield their faces. Safely inside his helmet Mike was oblivious to the discomfort of those around him. He'd crossed a divide and made an arbitrary decision to bring Natalia into the fold of Noble. Technically she already carried the team designation of Noble Seven but no one, including Commander Carter, had ever used it. He himself felt like an outsider still, who was he to direct the sentiments of the others like that? His feelings were

pretty clear. Natalia had earned it. If the others didn't see that, well, that was their problem.

Jorge gestured from the side of the Falcon and called out, "Need a lift, Spartan?"

Mike hesitated, the offer was singular. Since their first encounter with the Covenant he'd been bringing Natalia along. At first it had been because no one else would but he'd started to get used to having her around. He actually liked it. This time was different though. He'd been directed to this mission and they were heading to recon a spire, the center of the Covenant defensive position on the Szurdok Ridge. Suddenly, Noble Seven or not, he didn't want her there, he didn't want her in harm's way in this form. It didn't make sense but then when ever did in matters of the heart? He longed for the simple days of the Lone Wolf but he also liked the feeling inside of himself when he looked at Natalia.

"Come on Six, move your butt. We ain't got all day," the big Spartan II chided him.

Kat sensed Mike's dilemma and solved it for him. "Hey, Misriah," she called out, "you can help with this Intel gathering. Set up a comms relay on top of the platform for me."

Natalia looked at Mike for a lingering moment, longing for him to invite her along but instead he turned and walked to the idling Falcon as Jorge gestured him into one of the gunner's positions. Disappointed and a bit confused Natalia took the offered satellite uplink array from Kat and trudged towards the entrance to the now idle AA battery to begin the mundane task offered to her. It felt like one step forward and two steps back.

"What was that all about?" Jorge asked Mike as the now brooding Spartan slumped into the alternate gunner's position and pulled the cocking lever on the automatic grenade launcher in the cradle.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, caught off guard.

"Whatever's going on with the ONI women," Noble Five responded.

"It's nothing," Mike declared, signaling with his tone and body language he didn't want to talk about it.

"All right," Jorge caught the implied declaration. "Spotted some nasty business in the canyon on the way down," he changed the subject.

The twin rotors whined to life as the Falcon lifted off from the position and began to head towards a large canyon to the left of their position back towards the line of advance of the main UINSC force.

"I'll call out targets as we go," the Falcon pilot stated over the birds com link, signaling the time for personal conversation was over. They were heading into a hot spot and the two members of Noble Team were acting as the chopper's gunners so needed to be sharp.

Angling into the sheer-sided canyon Mike had the opportunity to see how the battle was unfolding from above. UNSC troops had swarmed the Covenant position in the beige, non-descript terrain below, overrunning many but the full extent of the invaders penetration became evident as well. There were thousands of Covenant troops on the ground and hundreds of vehicles it seemed. Mike's heart sank at the sight; doubt that they'd be able to win this planet grew. Still, with air support and an aggressive posture they could win this fight. One day at a time.

While he mused about their condition Mike could see a narrow bridge spanning the chasm and linking up a road that wound its way along a shelf partway up the canyon wall. This was the only way through this canyon on the ground so Covenant reinforcements were attempting to cross to assist their beleaguered comrades on the other side who the human forces were systematically rolling back.

"Top of the canyon, dead ahead," the Falcon pilot called out the priority target.

"Copy that," Jorge acknowledged with his distinct accent. "All right Six, let's clear the way for our ground pounders."

Mike needed no encouragement. Even before the Spartan II had finished his sentence he pulled the trigger of the auto grenade launcher. The deadly gun barked several times shooting explosive charges towards the surging Covenant. Yellow tracer rounds came up towards the Falcon in return but the pilot expertly maneuvered around them. Mike watched with satisfaction a chain reaction of small explosions below before picking a new series of targets for his next salvo.

Though the Falcon kept moving the pilot did slow the pace in order for the two Spartans to bring as much fire to bear as possible on the bridge. It seemed to do the trick and the Covenant forces on the bridge were eliminated, relieving the threat to the advancing UNSC troops.

"Nice shooting Spartans," the Falcon's pilot called out enthusiastically.

On the ground a platoon of UNSC Army troopers cheered and waved up at the Falcon helicopter that had just flown through and assisted them at the right time. The salvo of grenades from the two launchers on the helicopter had cut down the Covenant reinforcements before they could get engaged.

"No time for a party, come on, keep pressin' 'em," Emile barked to the celebrating soldiers.

"Let's go 12-Delta," their platoon commander called out, adding to the Spartan's call, "saddle up and keep moving."

Crack

Jun's SRS99 AM sniper rifle erupted reinforcing the fact the situation was still tenuous. The Elite on the receiving end of the message tumbled from an outcrop on the road ahead, tumbling falling roughly to the dirt ground on the side of the road leading away from the bridge.

The taciturn Spartan then set his rifle into a Warthog and jumped into the driver's seat. "Come on Emile, let's roll."

His volatile teammate hopped up behind the LAAG and racked a fresh round into the chamber. The distinct etching on his faceplate of a grinning skull seemed to give him a permanently aggressive look, which in truth he was.

The two had been fighting with the lead echelon of the UNSC advance since the initial thrust. With the bridge now open they could link up with the human forces advancing on the opposite side of the river and canyon that split the territory in two. As if on signal, lead armor elements came over the rise led by a troop of Scorpion tanks.

"Noble Lead, this is Noble Three," Jun reported to Commander Carter, "elements have linked up and we're preparing to move in concert towards Spire One."

"Copy that," Carter replied from his perch in the Falcon above. "Kat has set up an Intel gathering point not far from your location. We still need more data on what we're up against. Wait one." The team leader shifted his conversation to Kat. "Noble Two, you have until the 12-Delta lead elements break out of the canyon to the plain. Get what you can from you location, upload it to ONI and prepare for extraction."

"Roger, understood," Kat replied coolly on the open channel. "Race against the clock, got it," she confirmed, non-plussed by the time pressure.

"Okay Jun, keep pressing and we'll get you what we can before the assault. Jorge and Mike are airborne and moving ahead of you to do a recon so you'll be prepped. Good hunting." Carter signed off.

"Must have been then flying above giving us the assist," Jun said more to himself than anyone but Emile caught it.

"Yea, well I'm still not sure about our new Six," Emile responded.

"He's solid and a good soldier," Jun countered.

"I know that," Emile declared grudgingly. "It's just, he's not Noble. He's not one of us."

"You know what Jun? Cut out that crap," the sniper's anger flared, a rare emotional outbreak for the stoic Spartan. "He's earned a spot and done more than any of us on this mission."

"Come onâ€¦"

"No you come on Emile," Jun shot back. "What's this all about? Are you jealous because he's got more kills or are you ticked because the cute ONI chick has a thing for him and not you?"

"It's not that, it's justâ€¦," Emile's voice trailed off because in reality he couldn't answer Jun's pointed question.

"Enough of this okay?" Jun slapped him encouragingly on the back. "If we're going to win this we need the Lone Wolf. Okay?"

"You really think we can win this?" Emile answered in surprise, being given a few things to consider.

"If we can take down this spire we can eliminate the rest of the resistance on the ground, if we do thatâ€¦" Jun declared optimistically.

Emile cut in, catching his teammates optimism, "Yea and if the fly boys from fleet and the MACS up above can take care of that, we might just come out of this ahead."

The battalion commander roared past standing up in the passenger seat of a Warthog signaling the continuation of the advance meaning the conversation between the two Spartans would have to wait. The timing was good since neither dared express the hope they were beginning to feel. It was too audacious.

Now well ahead of the human advance Mike and Jorge had plenty of targets to pick as they moved through the canyon. Passing several two story structures that appeared to be processing plants of some form it was obvious to the Spartans that they'd been converted to artillery and anti-air usage. In addition several watch platforms for snipers had been erected to impede any approach to the Spire that lay beyond. Supporting the defensive positions were liberal numbers of heavy infantry along with numerous Wraith mortar tanks. The Covenant seemed determined to hold the area.

The Falcon piloted bobbed and weaved away from the steady anti-aircraft fire trying to reach them as Mike and Jorge peppered the area liberally with rounds from their side-mounted grenade launchers. The Falcon's nose mounted camera captured not only the action but more importantly the Covenant troop concentrations along the axis of advance. The commander of the lead battalion watched and prepared for his troops to enter the meat grinder.

Then the Falcon broke out of the canyon and just as suddenly as it had begun the ground fire ceased. But there was no cause for elation because immediately coming into view was not only the spire they sought to investigate but a pale blue, transparent shield surrounding the structure like a bubble.

The massive structure lying behind the shield rose from a base that seemed to be buried in a massive crater surrounded by mounds of sand. Rising up to the clouds in the sky above the multi-layered structures top couldn't be seen. The lower level seemed to be projecting several bluish purple energy beams that appeared to be keeping the circular upper section suspended high above it. The bubble around it that the UNSC Falcon was flying towards seemed to be emanating from the structure itself by some sort of shield-generator array.

"There's the spire," the Falcon pilot called out redundantly, in awe of the massive structure.

Auntie Dot cut in, "Latest Intel suggests these spires may be projecting electromagnetic cloaking shields."

"Solid copy, Dot," Commander Carter responded. "Proceed with caution Charlie 4. Kat, you picking up the feed?"

"Roger that Commander," Kat answered back hesitantly from the destroyed AA battery. The Spartan was examining some data she'd been able to hack from the Covenant command mainframe.

"Is everything okay?" Natalia asked, picking up the hesitation in the usually confident Spartan.

"Yea, I think so. Just getting some strange readings." Noble Two banged her fist on the console in frustration. "I can't figure them out."

"Does it have to do with Spire One?"

"I'm not sure but it's definitely the focal point for the region. If we can take it outâ€¦well, that's where their forces are concentrating and there's a lot of signal traffic and I mean a lot."

"Should you let Commander Carter know?"

"What? That something doesn't 'feel' right? He's looking for hard data, not hunches," Kat retorted in frustration.

The Falcon arrived at the shield surrounding the Spire. The pilot hesitated to go further, hovering just outside the now shimmering barrier. "This thing has a pretty strong power signature," he reported.

Jorge looked over at Mike who nodded his head in agreement. "Priority One, pilot. Gotta know what's in there."

"Affirmative, sir...", the pilot responded resolutely despite his reservations. "Here we go."

The Falcon flew forward heading towards the shield. As soon as the nose of the helicopter touched the shield a blinding flash of white light filled the entire cabin of the craft. Though it passed through, the EMP pulse of the shield caused a total system failure. The Falcon began to spin out of control as it plummeted towards the ground.

"We just lost all power," the pilot reported to Mike and Jorge as he feverishly tried to reboot the craft's systems. "It's no use. We're going down. Charlie 4 mayday, mayday."

Despite the stabilizers in their MJOLINIR suits, the two Spartans could feel the dizzying effects of the spinning helicopter

Desperate to hold on Jorge called out to Mike, "Lock your armor, Spartan!"

The pair tried to hold as the ground raced towards them

"Brace for a hard landing," the Falcon pilot screamed.

Back at the disabled AA gun position the view screen Natalia and Kat had been monitoring went black.

"Charlie 4, come in, over," Commander Carter attempted to communicate with the downed helicopter. "Charlie 4 report."

"Six, do you read me? Do you copy over?" Natalia called frantically over the team channel, breaking chain of command protocols.

"Noble Five, report," Kat jumped in as well, a concerned tone etched in her voice. "Five, Sitrep over"

"Do you think they're gone?" Natalia's voice trailed off.

"No," Kat snarled. "No. They're Spartans."

"Is there anything we can do?" Natalia wondered.

"Sure as hell there is," Kat responded. "We go get them." Opening the team channel Noble Two declared, "Commander, we're ready for extraction and move to Spire One."

"Roger that," Carter responded. "I'll be at the LZ in five minutes."

The Falcon landed hard, coming to a stop with a grinding screech of metal then all was silent. The jolt threw Mike out the open side of the helicopter and he tumbled out landing hard on the ground, momentarily dazed. Mike opened his eyes, not realizing he'd screwed them shut in the crash. It wasn't his first but he thought quickly this was something he didn't want to get used to. Shaking his head he realized he'd been thrown clear of the crash. The Falcon lay on its side, the rotors twisted in crazy directions. He saw Jorge come out of the helicopter seemingly unhurt, tossing out equipment. Mike got to his hands and knees, spotting an assault rifle nearby he stood up to assess the situation.

Jorge saw him and picking up his HMG came over. "Crew's dead," the Spartan II reported without emotion. "We shouldn't stay here."

"Noble Lead, this is Noble Six, come in," Mike tried to raise Commander Carter. "Comms seem to be down." He banged the side of his helmet with his fist as if to try to knock it back into working order as nothing but static came up.

"Interference from the shield shouldn't be enough to take it out," Jorge commented. "Maybe the EMP pulse fried it."

"Maybe," Mike paused, unsure what to do. Then with resolution declared, "Hopefully it'll reset as the system reboots. For now, we're on our own. At least the IFF is up."

"Yea, and I'm showing hostiles all over the place," Jorge responded, "we gotta move."

Covenant sentries had spotted the down Falcon and the movement of the two Spartans. Beam rifle rounds sizzled in announcing the discovery as the pair moved to get away. Firing while they moved to disrupt the attack of the guards the pair crossed a small river and began to move towards what had been some sort of work camp before the invasion. Now it crawled with Covenant.

Greeting the Spartans at the base of the dirt road leading into the camp a pair of Jackals locked their shields and fired, trying to stop Mike first. Just behind Jorge's HMG hummed and the two went down in a

hail of bullets.

Charging recklessly down the hill from the installation a half-dozen Grunts sought to check their progress. Mike threw a well-placed grenade that erupted in the middle of them, scattering the skittish creatures.

Still moving upward, closer to the spire, a trio of Elites stepped out from behind a rocky outcrop to intercept the Spartans. As Mike and Jorge tangled with the Lone Wolf spotted at the last moment a Suicide Grunt waddling towards him, its Plasma Grenade already primed. Pulling back from the Elite he shifted position to maneuver the Grunt then drilled the squat creature with a three round burst beside the Elite. The grenade exploded taking down the Sangheili. Jorge mowed down the second and third.

The two members of Noble Team continued to skirmish back and forth with the Covenant guarding the installation, getting closer but still unsure what to do until they heard the sound of an approaching Falcon. Mike decided to try the comms, praying they'd reset.

Earlier, back at the ruined Covenant AA battery, Natalia and Kat sprinted towards the hanging Falcon that hovered several feet off the ground for a quick extraction. Setting into the cabin Commander Carter asked Kat as the craft took off, "Did you pick anything up?"

"Yea, don't fly into the shield," she retorted angrily.

The leader of Noble Team ignored the dig. "Anything on the spire?"

Kat looked at Natalia and decided to be honest. "There's lots of signal traffic coming off the thing. Way more than there should be. There's more to this thing than it seems."

"Okay," Carter answered, mulling over the implications of the report. "Get us to the spire," he ordered the pilot, then to the other members of Noble Team added, "we still don't have radio contact with them but we'll go there and assess."

There was little more that could be said or done so the three sat in the speeding helicopter in silence.

Flying towards the Spire Commander Carter could see the ground forces making rapid progress towards their objective. The Covenant defenses had been broken and the invaders were in full retreat back to their staging area. Things were shaping up nicely for the attack, but still, the issue of the shield remained.

"Delta Actual, this is Noble Lead," he called to the commander of the ground assault, "be advised, there is a shield protecting Spire One. It has some sort of pulse field around it capable of a massive EMP burst."

"Copy that, Noble Lead," a male voice with slight southern drawl responded. "What do you advise?"

"I sent a team to recon but have lost contact with them. I'm moving

to that position to assess. Recommend you hold on contact with it and secure a defensive perimeter until the shield can be taken down."

"All right, but we got the Covvies on the run, make it quick Noble," the officer responded with a note of frustration. "We can sweep them off the Ridge."

Then the trio in the Falcon heard what they'd been longing for: "Noble Lead, Noble Lead, this is Noble Six, do you read me, over?"

Kat whooped in delight and Natalia felt her body shudder at the news. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good to hear your voice Six," Carter declared with enthusiasm.

"Our Falcon crashed when we hit the shield. Advise you don't make contact with it," Mike reported. "We're on the ground and in good shape though we've met heavy resistance. Spire One is well."

"Roger that," Noble One acknowledged, relieved his two men were still alive. They'd dodged another bullet it seems.

"Commander, we got eyes on the spire," Jorge cut in. "Looks like a staging area."

"Copy, we have your visual," Carter confirmed. "Dot's working the problem, stand by."

As the Falcon cleared the canyon the spire came into full view for the passengers of the helicopter. A Covenant Phantom seemingly appeared out of nowhere in the spire's midsection, then flew away.

"What the hell?" Kat exclaimed at the startling sight.

"Noble Five, ONI believes those spires to be teleportation terminals," Auntie Dot's electronic voice reported.

"Teleporter? Linked to what?" Jorge asked.

"That could account for the sigs traffic I picked up," Kat mused to Commander Carter.

"Frigate Grafton is on station ready to kill that spire, but first we need to power down its shields," Carter detailed to the two Spartans on the ground.

"Understood," Jorge acknowledged. Then turning to Mike he grimly stated, "You heard the man Six. I'll hold these bastards off, you find a way to the top of the spire."

"All right, I'll see you at the top," Mike answered quietly. Then he held out his hand for Jorge to shake. Instead the big Spartan II grabbed him in an embrace then shoved him towards the spire. "Get it done Spartan."

Mike racked a fresh magazine into his assault rifle then began to jog towards the objective, touched by the gesture of his team mate. Yes,

they were team mates. He was part of Noble Team and he wouldn't let them down.

16. Chapter 16

****Chapter 16****

****1524, August 12, 2552 Szurdok Ridge, Viery Territory, Planet Reach****

Moving up and over the crest of the hill they'd been climbing, Mike could see the base of the spire and gravity lifts it held. It seemed as if the massive structure had been dropped from space onto this spot considering the size of the crater and debris scattered around. Regardless, he wasn't there to theorize, he was there to destroy.

A sniper with a fuel rod gun tried to take him out as he moved forward, the bolt sizzling just past his head. Ignoring the unknown assailant he left that for Jorge and heard the satisfying chatter of Spartan's HMG. Mike concentrated on the guards, fighting his way to the bottom of spire. Eliminating the Grunts guarding it without a pause he hopped into the gravity lift. The blue beams of light lanced upwards, making Mike's skin crawl despite the armor he wore, as he flew up to the top of the structure.

Following in his wake, Jorge moved into position securing the grav lifts giving Mike the best chance he could. Nothing was going to get past him.

"Noble Leader, Six is on his way up," Jorge reported, shredding a Jackal attempting to sneak up on him.

"Get in there," Carter switched to Mike after the report. "Take out that shield, Lieutenant."

Arriving at the top it appeared as if Mike's coming was expected as a bevy of Grunts surged in to stop his progress. Deftly tossing a frag grenade that stopped their progress, it allowed him to step out and move away. Using his assault rifle he cleared a path, looking for what would appear to be the control panel for the shielding system of the massive structure

"Spartans, I'm en route with a Falcon, will pick you up as soon as you knock out power to that shield," Commander Carter broke in during the skirmish.

"Ready when you are, Six," Jorge added from below, the sound of his own desperate battle coming in loud and clear.

Mike knew time was running out.

Covenant forces continued to desperately seek to stop him. Noble Six kept on firing and moving, looking for the control panel. Then, it was shown to him

A white armored Elite Ultra, stepped away from a control panel, drew his Energy Sword and with a roar charged at Mike. He stood ready to face the assault but at the last moment stepped aside as the deadly sword whistled past his head. The Elite's forward momentum carried

him past the Spartan which allowed Mike to bash it with the butt end of his assault rifle on the back of the head. The Elite turned and slashed at the Spartan's mid-section but the earlier hit had set the Sangheili off balance so Mike side-stepped it as well and smashed down on the Elite's head, dropping its shield. Taking a half step back Mike then emptied the clip of his MA37 into the Ultra's stomach. The warrior slumped to the metal decking dead.

Reloading as he moved towards the control panel, the Ultra's death set the defenders back on their heels for the moment Mike needed. Quickly scanning the panel he reported, "I'm on location and at the panel."

"Hurry, Lieutenant. We got a frigate inbound to blow that spire as soon as the shield is powered down," Carter replied urgently. "Drop the shield and get out of there."

Natalia could feel her hands begin to ache from the tension of gripping them tightly. She consciously tried to relax as she watched the spire through the shimmering blue shield that kept them from it. She could hear nothing but imagined Mike racing through the massive structure in an attempt to allow them access.

Then the shield was gone.

Natalia blinked her eyes to ensure they weren't playing tricks on her at the same time the others caught it.

"Shields down, sir," the Falcon pilot reported.

"Get us in there, now," Commander Carter ordered urgently.

"Ready for extraction," Mike's rushed voice came over the comms, "marking a pick up point now."

Jorge had already set one so the Falcon moved to pick him up first then raced to the spot Mike had marked.

As they approached all in the Falcon could see it was an opening in the structure but there was no place to land.

"Sir, what are we going to do?" the pilot asked in concern.

Natalia instinctively tried to get up to do something but the restraining hand of Kat held her down. "Trust him. He knows what he's doing," she declared confidently.

Then they spotted Mike sprinting down a corridor towards the opening in the structure.

"I'm ready for you Six," Jorge called out.

Mike put on one last burst of speed then he jumped for the hovering Falcon. Natalia swallowed her heart and wanted to scream but she would trust the two Spartans. Mike hung in the air for a moment that seemed to take an eternity then reached out his hand which was grasped by Jorge who hauled him into the helicopter.

"Got him!" Jorge reported triumphantly.

"Get us outta here," Carter ordered the pilot.

The Falcon turned and the pilot increased power. The engines screamed as the twin rotors beat the air furiously as they began to pull away from the spire.

"Control? This is Noble One. Spire One is green, and you're free to engage," Carter relayed. "Have a nice day."

"Copy that, Noble One," the UNSC air controller for the area acknowledged. "Be advised, all ground units: Frigate Three-One-Eight heavy is inbound, and MAC rounds have been authorized."

"MAC rounds? In atmosphere?" Jorge exclaimed.

"One way to get their attention! Hang on to your teeth people!" Carter responded, exhilarated by everything that had transpired and the thought they might actually win this one.

As the Falcon moved away from the spire, the frigate UNSC Grafton, in a shallow dive, moved past them. Everyone in the helicopter braced themselves.

The heavy frigate continued towards the spire, and, with a bright flash, its MAC cannon spit from its nose, hitting the Spire and shattering it. Like a house of cards, the structure collapsed towards the ground

"Yea!" Jorge exclaimed in satisfaction. Turning back and nodding towards the other members of Noble Team he failed to notice what had gotten their attention.

A purple glow illuminated the sky above the Grafton. From within the cloud an energy projector beam shot down from the sky hitting Grafton's bow section, instantly gutting the ship. Seconds later secondary explosions blossomed along the hull, and the Grafton began to plummet towards the ground.

"New contact. High-tonnage," Auntie Dot cut in urgently.

"No. No! Somebody tell me this ain't happening!" Jorge cried out as the horrified passengers in the Falcon watched the aft section of the Grafton explode while the forward section crashed to the ground.

"UNSC frigate Grafton, do you copy?" the UNSC Air Controller called out desperately.

"Grafton is dust!" Commander Carter responded to the call, then switching to the Falcon pilot ordered, "We need to get out of here, now!"

As the shattered UNSC Grafton fell towards the surface, with the spire's cloaking projector gone the clouds above it cleared to reveal a massive Covenant super-carrier in a holding position over the destroyed spire.

Banshee fighters came screaming out of the carrier seeking to intercept the retreating Falcon.

"Push it!" Carter yelled at the pilot. "We've got to clear this area. Get us to the friendlies."

Blue plasma bolts shot out of the nose cannons of the Covenant fighters seeking to destroy the UNSC helicopter bobbing and weaving its way back towards the canyon. Moving into the narrow confines of the chasm the Falcon pilot had less room to move giving the Covenant fighter pilots the opportunity to draw a bead. The pilot spotted the lead elements of the UNSC ground forces and for a moment thought everything would be okay. Then he looked back and his blood chilled. Dozens of Phantom dropships had been unleashed from the Covenant Super-carrier and were already moving towards the human line of advance. The safety of the UNSC line appeared to be somewhat academic.

It didn't matter anyway.

A shot from one of the swooping Banshees finally connected with the Falcon, destroying one of the engines.

"Engine Two is off line sir, we're going down," the pilot reported to Commander Carter. Spotting an opening in the rocky canyon that seemed to provide some protection he began to move towards it. "I'm going to drop us in the spot I'm setting up a Nav point for. Should be not too bad to hump it to our ground troops."

"Affirmative, good job," Carter confirmed.

It had been a good plan until another Banshee decided to seek to finish off the crippled bird.

"Inbound Tango at 3 o'clock," the pilot called out an urgent warning to his gunner.

The gunner swiveled his turret as fast as he could but opened up with the side-mounted 20mm autocannon a little too late. Before the Covenant single seat fighter went up in an orange fireball it connected with two plasma rounds smack on the side of the Falcon, causing it to lurk onto its side and begin to spin crazily out of control towards the ground.

"I've lost control!" the pilot called urgently to the passengers stuffed into the compartment. "We're going in hard, brace for impact!"

With a screech of metal on rock the Falcon slammed into the side of the canyon, well away from where it had intended to land and fell with a thud onto the rocky floor of the canyon.

Mike rolled away from the wreckage and was on his feet immediately, scanning the area for hostile contacts, his assault rifle tracking back and forth. They'd been thrown into some sort of defile in the wall of the canyon which gave them some cover. It was quiet and thus far nothing could be seen or came up on his HUD. Still holding a defensive posture he looked back and saw Kat checking on the Falcon's pilot who was still strapped into the cockpit while Jorge tended to the gunner who'd been thrown clear. Commander Carter seemed a bit wobbly and was down on one knee, hunting for a canister of Biofoam. Beyond that, everything seemed in order.

No, it wasn't.

Instinct took over and abandoning his defensive position he rushed back to the wreckage of the downed Falcon.

"Tali! Tali! Are you in there?" Mike called out urgently when he couldn't see the woman. He began to search the twisted remains of the helicopter until Natalia began to climb out of it. Awkwardly she pulled herself from the pile of wreckage. Though the MJOLINIR armor had protected her she'd forgotten to lock it out prior to impact so every bone in her body ached. Still, nothing seemed broken.

Even though Mike had his helmet on she could tell by his posture he was genuinely concerned. "You okay Tali?" Mike asked. If she'd had any doubt that the Lone Wolf has some feelings for her they were now gone. Despite everything, something deep in her heart warmed. He'd called her Tali.

"Yea, I'm good," she lied, not wanting to be a burden. The sound of battle nearby could already be heard.

Commander Carter walked towards them with a slight limp. "Sitrep?"

"Gunners dead. Broke his neck on impact," Jorge reported.

"We got a problem Commander," Kat joined in. "Pilots alive but has two broken legs and internal damage. He's in pretty rough shape."

"Can he be moved?" Carter asked, an edge to his voice, as an explosion filled the air not far from their position.

"I've stabilized him so yea, he can move but he's not going anywhere fast."

"Great," Carter huffed in frustration. Checking his IFF for the area he determined their position. "Okay, we're in no-man's land. We're between the main body of 12 Delta and the Covvies. We need to get the pilot to a medevac which means we need to make it to our line. We go quiet but steady. Misriah, you assist Kat setting up a stretcher for the pilot. Jorge, you got rear. Six, take the point." The Commander of Noble Team set a waypoint on their HUDs. "Let's move."

Back with the lead UNSC grounds elements, the turn of events had come as just a shock.

"What the hell is that?" Emile exclaimed as the Covenant capital ship materialized out of the clouds once the Grafton went down.

"Super-carrier," Jun responded, emotion etching his usually calm voice. "Oh man, this is bad."

Punctuating the declaration was the cry of, "Inbounds! We got inbounds! Look to the skies."

Troopers scrambled to get into position on the UNSC anti-air assets. Guns on Warthogs were brought to bear and rocket launchers broken out as Banshees screamed over the lead elements of the human ground

forces tearing into it with fire from their twin plasma cannons along with fuel rod rounds. Not far away Phantoms were already landing deposit ground forces in the area to intercept.

The humans had lost the initiative.

Moving out of the cover of the defile in the canyon Mike lay prone among a group of rocks to assess the situation. What he saw wasn't encouraging. Already the human forces were being pushed back by the counterattacking Covenant. The distance to safety already had grown further than he'd hope for.

"What do you see, Six?" Carter's voice came over the comms.

"Nothing good," Mike answered grimly. "12-Delta is falling back. So far they seem to be moving in good order but that could change anytime. Covvies are really bringing it to them."

Commander Carter swore to himself and then looked back at the Falcon pilot being carried an improvised stretcher by Kat and Natalia. If it was only them they could move fast and even help the pressed UNSC forces. If onlyâ€¦

The leader of Noble Team shook the dark thought that crept into his mind away. No one was going to be left behind. "See any route for exfil?" he asked Noble Six.

"Wait one," Mike replied, surveying the terrain with an expert eye. Most of the canyon floor was exposed, not ideal for a party carrying wounded. Then he saw something. There appeared to be a small path that branched out from the main route running along the river bisecting the canyon. It hugged the wall and while not allowing a lot of space to maneuver it was in the shadows and out of the way of the main battle. It wasn't much but it might work. "Beggars can't be choosers," Mike muttered to himself. Got something," he reported back. "It's not much but it might work. Setting Nav points now." Then, holding to the shadows, the Lone Wolf moved with the terrain, scouting ahead.

Travelling cautiously, the group was able to make steady progress towards the ever moving human line. With the battle moving further away it seemed to get easier. That was until breaking the crest of a small rise to their side a half-dozen Jackals appeared, spotting the humans below and too their left.

Squawking in surprise, the avian creatures who had detached themselves from the main action to scavenge the field responded to the shocking discovery of the armored soldiers to their rear quickly, too quickly to be dealt with. Mike was able to drop two with a controlled burst of fire from his assault rifle but then the remnant snapped on their energy shields and it became a tactical fight.

Commander Carter moved up to support Mike as the Lone Wolf moved to an advantageous position to engage the remaining Jackals who were holding the higher ground and seeming to be deciding what to do. Quickly and efficiently the two Spartans eliminated the threat but it was too late. The sound of Grunts and Elites moving back towards the sound of the gunfire was evident on the slight breeze coming from further ahead.

"Gotta move," Mike called out urgently. "We got company coming."

"Where do we go?" Carter asked.

"This route's screwed," Noble Six declared, knowing their only previous chance had been to fly under the radar and sneak through the enemy's lines. "We need another way." To punctuate his point two Grunts came waddling over the rise, their plasma pistols primed to fire. Mike shot the first one causing the weapon to overload and burst, killing the other. The blast though was as good as a beacon.

"We need another way," Mike repeated, slapping a fresh mag in his assault rifle.

"I'm working on it," Carter shot back. "Dot, you got anything for us?"

"Yes Commander," she responded in her cool voice. "There is an opening 300 meters ahead and to your right. It will take you on a circuitous route away from the main conflict but it will allow you to intersect the reforming UNSC forces. I'm setting a waypoint now."

"This seems to be a bit out of our way," Jorge commented as the marker came up on the team's HUD, showing the route that took them out of the canyon and around.

"I estimate nine point three kilometers out of your way Chief Warrant," she answered, not catching the Spartan II's sarcasm.

"All right people, no other option," Carter declared. "Let's move like we got a purpose."

"Hingeheads!" Kat yelled as three Elites charged over the hill to engage the party.

"Jorge, cover the pilot, Six, you and me take care of this," Carter ordered, charging towards the Sangheili.

Mike for a chance got to see their commander in the role of warrior instead of detached leader. He kind of liked it. Dropping to his left and three strides back he fired into the advancing Elites not so much to damage them but to create a distraction for the retreating stretcher party. Plasma rounds splashed onto Mike's armor causing it to drop precariously but he kept moving, knowing what level he could allow it to get to. For his part Commander Carter took the fight right to them, not stopping for anything. Instead, as he moved within arm's length of the first startled Sangheili he deftly withdrew a combat knife from a scabbard attached to his armor and drove it into the gapping hinged maw of the Elite.

The large warrior had been unprepared for the nature and savagery of the attack. Carter stabbed repeatedly, his hand blurring with the speed. The Elite's two compatriots were momentarily stunned by the savagery of the attack as was Mike. He'd never seen their leader so aggressive. He recovered though before their foe and was able to place a burst of armor piercing rounds dead on center of mass. The

Elite's shield dropped and the next three bullets slashed through vital organs killing it instantly. Mike moved in and bashed away with the butt end of his rifle at the same time as Commander Carter joined in, stabbing viciously with his knife. The Elite went down in the flurry of violence brought against it.

Mike watched Noble One breathing heavily from the exertion and then looked to see that the two women carrying the stretcher and Jorge were closing in on the opening with no opposition giving them a short breather.

"Wow, that sure was something," Mike commented to the leader of Noble Team. "I wasn't sure you had it in you."

Carter chuckled. "Me either. It's been a while since I got the chance to just fight, you know what I mean. I'm always having to lead. That was kind of fun. I envy you a bit Wolf." Then slapping Mike on the back he declared, "Come on, let's catch up with the others."

Rejoining, their respite was short lived. Squads of Covenant converged and looked to stop the humans though they were able to make it to the narrow path leading out of the canyon. Carter took the lead, sending Jorge back to support Mike with his heavy machine gun. They'd hold a position, allowing Kat and Natalia to get ahead of them, then dash up the ravine, set up a new position and start all over again. Despite moving away from the canyon the Covenant forces continued to doggedly pursue them.

For Kat and Natalia, theirs was the constant of dodge fire and move while attempting to shield the injured Falcon pilot with their bodies. Though the rest of the team did their best to keep the party clear, regularly their armor was catching the brunt of fire.

Bouncing along on the improvised stretcher the pilot was obviously suffering. "Leave me," he begged. "I'm done anyway. Save yourselves."

"Shut your mouth," Kat growled. "We're getting you out of here. But if you keep that up, I'll shoot you myself."

Natalia was impressed by Kat's determination. This was a new sensation for her: carrying and not being able to fight. She knew her armor could absorb the occasional hit but to not be able to defend herself after she'd finally learned how was unsettling. All her life the Stinger had been a fighter, the aggressor, never one to sit back. Now she was in order to defend someone else unselfishly. Combined with the general soreness she felt from the crash she was quite unsettled. In an attempt to distract herself from the pain and growing fatigue she let her mind drift as she pushed her body to keep up with Kat's pace at the head of the stretcher. Instead of anything pleasurable she fixated on the spectacle of the UNSC Grafton plummeting to the ground. She thought of Captain Mallarde and how he'd bent over backwards to accommodate her when he found out who she was, she thought of the cute deck officer with dark hair whose name she couldn't remember who she'd flirted with shamelessly on the early part of the flight, leading him to believe he had a shot with her. The image of the female navigator she'd mocked for being a bit chubby and plain came into view uncomfortably also.

Spoiled little rich girl.

Kat's previous words penetrated her mind like a Needler round. They were true. Mallarde and nearly 500 crew and Marines had died when the Grafton went down and she couldn't name any besides the captain despite having travelled with them for over a week. The horror of the ship's destruction was overwhelmed by the realization of her own pride. But the emotions welling up in her were not just about that.

The war had become that much more real for her.

Up until that point it had been her and Noble Team chewing up Covenant but that sight hung in her consciousness. The war had always been some inanimate thing to her, a nuisance really. Now, it took on a whole new dimension. This was a fight for survival, not a nuisance or opportunity for advancement like MacKenzie or her father saw it. Thousands were dying to protect humanity. She likely would too considering the firepower of the Covenant super-carrier but suddenly that was okay. She'd gladly give her life, though she loved it dearly, to do her part.

The main fighting had moved further down the Szurdok Ridge, away from the beleaguered party. As they moved down the winding trail out of the canyon all that seemed to remain were clean-up parties of Covenant. With the elimination of the last one that had unsuccessfully tried to stop the members of Noble Team and the wounded pilot there came a sudden, but welcome, lull in the action.

"What do you think, Six?" Carter asked stopping to look around.

Mike paused for an extended length of time before speaking, surveying the area twice then two more times to be absolutely sure. He abruptly felt anew the pressure of working with others. Part of him hated the sensation but a growing part was motivated in a way he'd never been before. He was part of something close and intimate, a team, a family.

"It's all clear," Noble Six reported confidently.

"All right, take five people," Carter declared a rest stop. "Jorge, you take overwatch." The commander then went off by himself to try to raise someone on the tactical channel while Kat used the time to work on the wounded pilot leaving Mike and Natalia alone and with some free time.

Mike sat down on a rock, took off his helmet then dug out an emergency ration bar. He hesitated for a moment, knowing how disgusting the taste would be, but hunger overruled his sensitive palate. He notice Natalia come over, her helmet hanging limply in her hand, and just stand beside him, saying nothing.

"You okay?" Mike asked, sensing things weren't right with the woman. But then he realized, how could they be? A few weeks ago she was on Earth, living comfortably, now she was fighting for her life. He'd forgotten that. For him this was normal. How twisted was that? He realized then what a perverse life he lived. Part of him hated her for exposing it but another part was intrigued that there was another

life than the one he knew. Despite her red MJOLINIR armor she looked suddenly very fragile.

Not receiving a reply Mike asked again more pointedly, "Natalia, is everything okay? Are you hurt?"

"I thoughtâ€¦I thought you were gone when that Falcon crashed," Natalia confessed, voice breaking.

"It takes more than that to kill a Spartan," Mike responded lightly. Natalia dropped her head to avoid his look then he realized how upset the privileged woman really was. "Hey, it's all right. We made it through no problem."

Thinking Mike had died caused Natalia to throw away all pretenses since she now knew just how fleeting both their lives were. "Who's Melanie?" she asked, not able to contain herself anymore.

Mike dropped the ration bar in shock. "What did you say?"

"I asked you who Melanie is."

"How do you know that name?" Mike replied cautiously.

"You called me by it when the Warthog I was on crashed at the blown bridge," Natalia explained**.**

"I did?"

"Yea."

Natalia was now looking him straight in the eyes to gauge his response. The tables turned. It was now Mike who avoided her penetrating stare and looked away. She caught the look of utter sadness in the withdrawn Spartan's eyes and almost wished she hadn't asked him.

Almost.

Silence hung thick for a moment before Mike spoke. "Sheâ€¦she was a friend I knew from our training back in Onyx. No, she was more than a friend," he confessed, voice barely above a whisper.

"And you care about her?" Natalia asked, her heart dropping at the declaration.

"Cared."

"Cared? Did you have a falling out or something?" Natalia responded, hope rising but missing the implications of the statement.

"No, she's dead. Killed on a mission that I should have been killed on too," Mike answered, an edge to his voice, "instead I got pulled and became this Lone Wolf character.

"Mike, I'm so sorry!" Natalia apologized. "I didn't mean toâ€¦,"

"Forget it," he cut her off.

"No, really. I didn't mean to cause you more hurt. You don't deserve it."

"I said forget it. It's done," he demanded.

Exhausted and on the verge of panic Natalia couldn't continue. She'd run through her stores of energy and strength, now the tank was empty. She had nothing left. Tears welled up in her emerald green eyes then began to stream down her cheeks. Quietly she began to sob as the well of emotions she'd been accumulating broke loose. "I can't take this anymore," she declared about the tensions of feeling she had for this man overlaid onto the intensity of the war they were in the middle of.

Realizing he'd been overly harsh in his reaction to her asking about Melanie and feeling guilty for upsetting her, Mike mumbled, "I'm sorry too. You didn't deserve that."

All pretenses gone, Natalia merely sobbed in return loud enough for the others to hear. Kat glared at Mike, assuming he'd done something wrong. Noble Two had suddenly become protective of the young woman who was trying despite being out of her element.

"Hang in there," Mike tried to encourage Natalia, "It'll be over soon and you'll be on your way home."

"Home," she choked out as a retort. "You think that's what I want?"

"I...I'm not sure," Mike stammered, caught off guard by the enigmatic woman. "I thought you would."

Natalia snorted at Mike's ignorance of her feelings. "When is this going to end?" she blurted out in exasperation.

"Hard to say," Mike replied evenly. "There's a lot outside our control."

"I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"You can do it," Mike suddenly became compassionate, "you're tougher than you think."

"No, I've always pretended to be toughâ€¦I had to be tough," Natalia confessed, eyes welling up anew. "I don't want to pretend anymore."

The Lone Wolf paused for a moment, caught off-guard by the honesty of the proud woman. "Well, you've dropped into a storm and weathered it so far. You're doing fine, just stay with it."

Natalia suddenly paused and her mind shifted, seeing Mike in yet another light. She opened her mouth to speak, preparing to open her heart.

Commander Carter's voice came over the team's channel interrupting the conversation. "We have Covenant inbound." Their IFFs lit up in response. "Stand to and look sharp."

Mike stood up but before he put on his helmet he said to Natalia,

"Stick with me, I've got your back. It'll be okay." Then racking a round into the chamber of his assault rifle he then put his arm on the woman's shoulder. Suddenly Natalia thought she could fight the whole armada. The conversation could wait but they were going to have it soon.

17. Chapter 17

****Chapter 17****

****August 13, 2552 20:07 Hours, Szurdok Ridge, Viery Territory ****

The small party from Noble Team doggedly continued on with the injured Falcon pilot. They fought and dodged their way throughout the day until they were clear of the surging Covenant throughout the Viery Territory and were able to call for an extraction. This time it was a trio of heavily armed Pelicans that came to extract the refugees rather than the more lightly-armored Falcons. It was a testimony to the importance of the Spartans that valuable resources like that would be committed in the heat of battle to get them out.

To Commander Carter's relief Jun and Emile were on the lead Pelican and provided ground security for the pickup. But the extra firepower was unnecessary. The Covenant had seemed to pause in their advance, satisfied with what they'd accomplished.

Flying low to the ground to present less of a target the members of Noble had the opportunity to see the extent of the Covenant counterattack. The humans had not only lost all their gains from the day but had been pushed even further back. For now the invaders seemed to be consolidating their victory in the region and solidify their hold. The UNSC forces set up a new defensive line well back from their start point. It was a clear defeat for the aggressive counterattack.

That was lost on the Spartans and the wounded pilot.

For them they were just happy to be together and in one piece. Before they reached the rear area new orders had already come in for them to return to the front. In fact they were being sent not only to the tip of action but beyond. The team was to be inserted behind enemy lines.

Dropping into the temporary base that had been hastily set up a flurry of activity was obvious as supplies were being marshaled and, more ominously, a large hospital area set up for the casualties. Three medics ran over to the Pelican as it landed and pulled the wounded pilot out before the engines had even powered off.

As the Spartans hopped off to change aircraft so they could return to the front the Falcon pilot called out, "Hold on. I want to thank you for saving my life."

Kat paused and looked back. "No problem man."

"I mean it. You could have easily left me back there to die." The hardened combat veteran's face broke. "I even asked you too and you didn't. I won't forget what you did."

"Take it easy," Kat absorbed the compliment. "We'll see you in the fight sometime." Then she walked away.

"Hey Lt. Commander. You too," the pilot yelled to Natalia, causing the medics to stop moving him. "I never thought I'd be thanking someone from ONI. But thanks. I'd be dead if not for you."

Natalia's face flushed in embarrassment at the comment but she felt good for what she'd been part of. She had contributed. She had made a difference. Not with her looks, or with her connections, but rather with her efforts. It felt good to accomplish something that would never be written about or triumphed, but would be remembered more dearly by this wounded soldier.

"You're welcome," she replied genuinely. "I was happy to help. I'm glad we could get you out. Take care of yourself."

"You too ma'am," he replied, then saluted from his stretcher before being taken away.

Natalia didn't have a lot of time to mull over the incident since Noble Team was reinserted behind enemy lines to disrupt the Covenant and report on their activities. She didn't need too. She knew how she felt; more alive than she'd ever been her whole life. A situation many would have viewed as a curse she saw now as a blessing.

Dropping in well away from the Covenant forces Noble Team travelled on foot through the night nine kilometers back to the Szurdok Ridge where they found a cave to use as their base of operations. Getting an hour rest they then commenced operations.

Starting in the dark of night they began to scout the area and report back to command the disposition of the enemy then finding targets of opportunity they used laser guiders to call in remote missile strikes, seeking to disrupt the Covenant's troop concentrations. The Covenant eventually figured there were infiltrators behind their line and began to search for the Spartans but into the light of day they were unable to find, or stop, their activities. This cat-and-mouse game went on through the morning, past mid-day and into the early evening. The Spartans then switched tactics to direct attack, popping up and striking then moving away to another location, using the speed their MJOLINIR armor and physical enhancements gave them.

Finally needing a break, the team returned to the cave in the side of the mountain framing the plain they were working in for some rest and to eat. After a short break, Mike, Jun and Jorge went out to scavenge some supplies from a destroyed UNSC supply column several kilometers away while the rest worked on their next move.

Less than two hours later Natalia watched the three Spartans approaching their hiding place cautiously from her position guarding the entrance to the cave. A pair of massive four-clawed Scarab heavy assault platforms lumbered through their position, likely searching for the infiltrators who had been causing chaos throughout the day. Mike used a holograph projector to throw an image of himself in the opposite direction to where they wanted to go. The Covenant juggernaut took the bait and moved to intercept, firing its gun at the image. The discharge caused dirt to dislodge from the ceiling of the cave and fall lightly on Natalia but it did the trick. She

watched them break into a sprint as the distracted Scarab moved in another direction.

The trio moved passed Natalia and entered the sanctuary. Jorge had been carrying a large briefcase and threw it at Emile's feet.

"Got a present for you," the big Spartan II declared. "Merry Christmas."

Emile dropped to one knee and flipped open the case to examine the mine laying kit held within. "Aw, you shouldn't have, but it's just what I asked Santa for."

"Okay Dot," Commander Carter called up the team's dedicated AI ignoring the banter, "we've not had an update from command since the morning. What more do we know? What are we looking at here?"

"We now have identified a CSO-class supercarrier, the Long Night of Solace, as the one that is now sitting above the Viery Territory which has been completely lost by our forces," Auntie Dot reported in her cool voice.

"Implications and response?" Carter asked.

"Our foe is more devious than we imagined," Auntie Dot conceded. "That spire was indeed a teleporter linked to the cloaked, Covenant Supercarrier... A grave threat. Thankfully, help is imminent. Sixty percent of the UNSC fleet is en route to Reach from existing deployments. The first battle group should arrive within forty-eight hours."

"Forty-eight hours?" Jun declared incredulously, the mirth of the previous moment gone with the report. Removing his helmet and rotating his head he asked incredulously. "That's imminent?"

The group stood in the cave in frustration, each considering the implications not only of the development but the current threat.

"I thought the fleet would have been here already," Natalia stated, stunned by the low level of current support. "The Covenant have been here for over two weeks and they're just about to get here?"

"Welcome to the world of politics sweetheart," Emile responded grimly. "Lots of priorities in the galaxy."

"But this is Reach," the ONI officer declared doggedly, still unable to believe the delay or her lack of knowledge of the true workings of the UNSC command.

"Well now you're getting a taste of our life," the aggressive Spartan stated. "Maybe you'll be one of us after all."

Jun had been quietly observing the conversation. Then turning he saw Kat approach Commander Carter like she meant to pitch an idea to him. If was an all too familiar look to the members of the team. Jorge caught it too.

The sniper wiped some glowing ash from the big Spartan II's shoulder pauldron he'd picked up in their latest skirmish and asked, "Uh-oh.

Who's your money on this time?"

"Her," Jorge answered, taking off his helmet.

"You always pick her," Jun declared.

"She's always had him dialed in."

Kat caught the conversation and smirked since she was in fact on a mission. "That thing's crushing us, and we're waiting for backup? They'll be backing up a graveyard," she began to lay her foundation.

"All our nukes are either out-system or went down with the ships that carried them," Carter answered, not picking up that Noble Two was going somewhere with this. "You're preaching to the converted."

"How converted?" Kat asked pointedly.

Carter now caught the implication. "I know that look, Kat."

"You can say no," she responded coyly.

"No."

"You don't even want to hear it?"

"...Fine. I'll hear it," the leader of Noble Team stated grudgingly, knowing he would anyway.

"Remember that accident a couple years back?" Kat began. "Colony ship en route to Cygnus . Seven hundred dead?"

"Vaguely, a slip-space drive malfunction, right?"

"Actually, it worked fine. The drive was mounted improperly after a service haul-out. When it fired, it teleported half the ship to oblivion," the tech specialist explained.

"And this is relevant...how?" Carter asked, getting exasperated.

"A certain Covenant Supercarrier could, with some assistance, suffer the same unfortunate accident...", Kat let the idea hang in the air.

The rest of the team had now caught the gist of the conversation and began to listen in.

"Even for you, Kat, that's-" Carter declared.

"Inspired?" Kat cut him off.

"Not the word I would use," the team leader stated.

Not able to hang on the periphery of this conversation any longer Jorge and Emile walked up to them to join in.

"What's going on?" Jorge asked.

"Go ahead," Commander Carter declared in resignation. "Explain."

Kat reached for Emile's kukri but he instinctively stopped her.

"May I?" she asked playfully.

Reluctantly Emile allowed her to take his prized weapon as Jun and Mike walked up to join the conversation. Natalia though chose to remain outside the circle, remaining in her guard position, still troubled by the previous conversation.

"Don't cut yourself," Emile declared dryly.

Kat knelt down with a smug look on her face and began to doodle in the thin layer of dirt covering the rock floor of the cave. "Objective?" she began. "Destroy Covenant Carrier in geosynchronous orbit above us."

"This sanctioned, sir?" Jorge asked Noble One.

"What do you think?" Carter grunted.

"Oh." Jorge suddenly became more interested.

"Method? A slip-space drive in lieu of the nukes we don't have. Delivery system? Us," the irrepressible Spartan laid out. "Solvable? Getting us up there. That, and getting our hands on a slip-space drive."

Noble Two allowed the plan to hang in the air a moment, choosing to give Emile back his kukri.

"Thank you for sharing," she said light-heartedly.

"So...all we need is orbit-capable transport, and the single most expensive piece of equipment made by man?" Carter assessed skeptically.

Kat was unmoved by the obvious cynicism over the audacious plan. "As a soldier in the field I couldn't possibly have access to those kinds of resources- that said, a good place to look might be... I don't know, the nearest nonexistent launch site in the nonexistent Sabre Program, dismissed by three administrations as preposterous rumor... And in which our newest member was certainly never a pilot."

Everyone, including Natalia, turned to look at Mike.

"You're scary, you know that?" Emile declared.

Kat raised an eyebrow, then continued, "All we need is a green light from Holland."

"Good luck with that," the leader of Noble Team replied belligerently.

Unphased, Kat handed Carter a data pad. "You're the one asking him."

Commander Carter reluctantly took the pad, and turned away. Still, he did start tapping the buttons, knowing despite how audacious the plan

seemed it was the only chance they had to survive this conflict. "Oh, there's no way in hell he's gonna go for this," he muttered to himself.

While Noble One began his conversation with their commanding officer the rest of Noble Team found things to keep themselves occupied. Natalia was left with her thoughts.

This is Reach she thought to herself. _Why have we been so slow to respond to this? _ Then she remembered one of the team talking about politics. She'd always been on the positive end of 'politics' in her life especially considering who her father was and then working for Admiral Parangovsky. Now she knew what it felt like to be on the negative side of it. Another number, another statistic.

Just like Mike.

Initially she'd been irritated by him when they first met, especially when he'd rebuffed her flirtations. Then she'd been angry when he had to bail her out of her first experiences of combat. And all along the way she'd openly expressed those negative emotions like a spoiled little girl.

Like the spoiled little girl she was.

Natalia's heart was gripped at the thought like a hand squeezing it in a vise-like grip. Yes, she was interested in him, had strong feelings for him. But it had always been about her, her needs, her feelings.

It was never about him.

Conviction burned within but in the heat of shame began to burn away some of the last vestiges of her old self. It was a refiner's fire and she was becoming a new creation.

She'd needed to get to know him, truly, who he was, how he felt, and not just to satisfy some perverse curiosity she held.

It started now.

Walking over to Mike who was methodically loading extra magazines for his assault rifle she stopped short. Suddenly Natalia Misriah, Stinger, felt inadequate, like a little girl, and didn't know what to say.

Mike saw her standing there and stopped what he was doing. "You doing okay?" he asked kindly.

"I am," she began tentatively, "thank you." Then it clicked and everything came together for her. "And thank you for everything you've done. I don't think I've said that before."

"No troubles."

"No, seriously." The wall broke and reality flooded out. "You've watched out for me and you've helped me when no one else would. You've taught me and I've not really been appreciative. Mike, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you."

The declaration caught the Lone Wolf off guard. He could see vulnerability in this powerful woman she'd not allowed to seep out.

She'd also called him Mike.

"You're welcome," he answered, nodding his head in agreement slowly. "And for your part, you've put up with crap from me and team and held up like a trooper." He paused, as if wrestling with something. "I'm glad you're with us."

His granite grey eyes softened and he averted the woman's piercing gaze.

Suddenly Natalia saw not the legendary Lone Wolf, nor the armored super soldier but a man not much older than her with feelings and insecurities and she loved him for every one of them. He had so many layers of complexity about him, all the Spartans of Noble did, but Mike was different—special. She had these feelings and now knew she had to truly know him better and by turn allow him to know who she really was, or really was becoming. Then she'd trust to providence that he could and would feel the same way.

She knew where it had to begin.

"What—what was it like?" Natalia asked awkwardly, unsure how to phrase it.

"What do you mean?" Mike responded, a bit confused by the seemingly random comment.

"The procedure—when they changed you. Do you remember much of it?" Natalia asked quietly.

Mike gave the woman a hard look at the inquiry, trying to read her reason for asking. Then, seeing the reality of her sincerity he decided in that moment to unlock the memory and answer as openly. "I remember everything," he responded without emotion but voice dropping to barely a whisper. "It hurt—it hurt like hell." He paused, as if returning to the time years ago. "Yea. It was like my bones were on fire." His voice broke ever so slightly at the declaration.

Natalia saw Mike's Adam's Apple bob and his eyes get glassy at the memory. She didn't know what to say. Spontaneously she took her hand and put it on his arm, leaving it there.

Mike didn't flinch, and he didn't move his arm. He did avert his eyes from her and looked down. "The worst part though was they did something to alter our minds."

"What did they do?" Natalia asked breathlessly.

"I'm not sure. I wasn't even supposed to know but I did some digging a few years ago. They injected some chemicals into our brains." He was struggling to keep his emotions in check now. "It was supposed to help us last longer in combat, to keep fighting when we were tired or wounded—to fight to the end, regardless."

"Oh Mike—," Natalia cried out softly, her other hand taking his spontaneously.

"We were—we are disposable soldiers, good to get the mission done. But some of us have beat the odds."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't. I volunteered, not like some of the others."

"What do you mean?" Natalia asked. Now it was her turn to be confused.

"Don't tell me you don't know," Mike's voice suddenly became hard and he pulled his hand away from hers.

"Know what?" Natalia desperately wanted to keep the conversation from tumbling into the abyss she could see coming.

"A lot of us, like Kat, were kidnapped, taken from our homes for the war effort," Mike spat out and his head snapping up so he could look directly into her eyes.

"That can't be—," Natalia fumbled. She knew about the program, what had been done to these children, that was horrifying enough. But this? It wasn't possible.

"You're ONI," Mike retorted shaking his head in disbelief. "Look it up. Me, I volunteered, or was encouraged to anyway."

"That's terrible," Natalia whispered, thinking about how her father and mother would have reacted to something like that. Then she remembered her name was 'Misriah' and that meant privilege. It never would have happened, not like those other poor families who had no power or influence.

She wanted to tell Mike she loved him. She did, deeply, but how could she after that? She wanted to tell him no matter what the system did to him she didn't care. She loved him for who he was. But it would seem forced, like pity. Natalia swore out loud in anger at the frustration. How hard did this have to be?

Tell him!

Then Mike got up and moved over to where Jorge was field stripping his heavy machine gun without saying anything more.

Kat walked up to Natalia as Mike walked away, a curious look on her expressive face. The Spartan's mood couldn't be read.

"You need to tell him, you know," Kat declared as if reading her mind from the previous conversation.

"What do you mean?" Natalia asked, her heart starting to race at what she both feared and hoped was coming.

"I mean, tell him that you love him."

Natalia's eyes went wide as saucers at the bold declaration. It was now out in the open. "I..well, uh—I mean—I well—"

"You do, don't you? Because it's written all over your face," Kat

stated firmly.

"Yesâ€|yes I do," Natalia whispered. Then the floodgate opened and the release came. She did, she really did, no matter the circumstances or what others would think, she loved Mike with all her heart. Tears of joy welled up and spilled openly down her cheeks.

Kat chuckled then shook her head, bumping Natalia's shoulder in emphasis. "Then tell him how you feel. But I need to be there because I want to see his reaction. He'll likely have a heart attack."

"Why?" Natalia asked in surprise.

"He doesn't see it coming."

"How can that be?" Natalia pressed, surprised by the declaration but heart soaring that she could finally declare her feelings.

Listen, Misriah," Kat became hard again. "We were thrown into training as children that would break ODSTs. Our bodies were altered. They messed with our minds, then they sent us into the war for the last eleven years. We're all a bit screwed up so romance and shit like that, well, it's wasn't on the syllabus. So you need to go slow with the Wolf, let him get his bearings."

"Why are you doing this? I thought you hated me," Natalia wondered, both horrified for the reality of the declaration but also filled with compassion.

"Yea, I do," Kat confirmed with a shrug of resignation. "But I hate myself more and I'd like to see Mike happy. He deserves it."

"What about you? What makes you happy?" Natalia asked, curious about the abrasive Spartan. She was beginning to see her and all the members of Noble Team in a new light and starting to not only empathize but also care for those many in her circle would see as disposable. Never again would she allow herself that mindset or in others around her if she had the chance.

Kat face lit up mischievously at the question. "Being a thorn in people's asses." She gave the privileged woman a sisterly shoulder hug then laughed heartily.

"Okay people, gather round," Commander Carter called out, signing off from his conversation with Colonel Holland. The rest of the team stopped what they were doing and huddled around their leader in curiosity.

Carter looked at Kat for a moment then shook his head incredulously. "We got the green light from command for the mission." Jorge whistled in surprise. "It's still working its way up the chain of command but Holland gave us a go to begin. Prep to move to Farkas Lake and the research facility there. Covvies are pressing the base but so far we're holding it. But that means we'll have to fight our way in. So, we go in two teams. Team one is me, Six, Kat, and Jorge. We're going for the Sabre launch pad. Jun, you lead Emile and Misriah and create a distraction for the Covvies to buy us some time. Questions?"

"Why are we stuck with ONI girl?" Emile spat out. "Isn't she the Wolf's special friend?"

"Operational necessity dictatesâ€|," an exasperated Carter began to explain but Kat cut him off in mid-sentence.

"Hey, Emile, not only can she hold her own but she could probably take you one-on-one so stow that crap," Kat interjected. "And she's not ONI girl, she's Noble Seven, got it?" she bumped the volatile Spartan for emphasis.

The rest of the team, Natalia included, were stunned by the declaration so did nothing but stare at the woman in shocked disbelief. For her part Kat shrugged her shoulders, a sheepish grin on her face.

Commander Carter had his second shock in the last ten minutes but the clock was running. "Let's get this done. We RV with the Falcon in ten minutes."

18. Chapter 18

****Chapter 18****

****August 14, 2552 12:48 Hours, Sabre Program Launch/Research Range, Farkas Lake, Eposz ****

So far the plan had gone off without a hitch. The first Falcon had taken Jun, Emile and Natalia to the north side of the base and with the help of the station's garrison had gotten the Covenant's attention. If had taken little persuading for the troops guarding the research facility to join in the attack. After being in a defensive posture for over a week they were happy to go on the offensive and attempt to break the siege of their facility. While that was going on the second Falcon dropped Commander Carter, Kat, Jorge and Mike downrange from the facility. Though a bit of a hike, they moved quickly until Covenant forces screening the approach detected their movement. Fighting in a tight formation but not stopping, the echelon of Noble Team kept moving, linking up eventually with a contingent of UNSC defenders.

Moving through the outer defenses and then into the heavily defended research facility they made it to the launch towers for the highly secret Sabre space superiority starfighter in the center of the structure.

As an escort of UNSC Army troopers took them to their destination Jorge relaxed a bit. Wondering anew at the audacity of their plan he declared to the group, "Still can't believe Holland said yes to this."

"Well, some plans are too good to say no to," Kat replied coyly, yet still scanning around despite being inside the facility not willing to let her guard down.

"Let's get that Sabre airborne before he changes his mind," Carter cut in, staying focused on the task at hand.

"Control's right through that door, Commander," the male trooper

leading them gestured towards a door.

Heading towards the control room Mike began to try to remember what it was like to fly, and even how he was too do it, changing gears mentally.

It was premature. The fires burning throughout and plasma damaged wall in the corridor they advanced down should have encouraged him to not jump ahead.

An Army trooper flew through the air and crashed on the wall beside the advancing party just up the ramp they were travelling on. A roaring Elite followed up, but turned the wrong way to see the advancing group of humans. Mike switched back to Lone Wolf in an instant. Rather than shooting the Sangheili he bashed it several times with the butt of his assault rifle to drop its shield then jumping up on the bigger creatures back in one motion he pulled out his combat knife and plunged it into the neck on the struggling Elite.

"Warning: launch facility breached. Covenant forces have entered the base," the base PA system announced somewhat redundantly.

"Come on, we got to move," Carter declared urgently to the others. "If we don't get that Sabre off the ground this is all for nothing."

Speeding up, the team pushed through the remainder of the way without opposition, quickly reaching the control room. The signs of battle were everywhere. Dead troopers were sprawled around in a defensive posture, testimony to their efforts to hold the launch controls.

For the first time Mike felt a pang of guilt. These men and women had died to ensure he has this opportunity. He reminded himself it wasn't for him, it was for Reach. For the first time perhaps he realized how self-centered he'd been the last few years, thinking only of himself and his mission. The Lone Wolf. It was time to lose that moniker and start to fight for something more. He'd make sure the deaths of those around him who suddenly had faces he stopped to look at counted for something.

A warning claxon sounded as a bulkhead began to open, revealing a Sabre attached to a vertical launching rail. An open roof in the circular take-off area with a generous blast zone for the rocket engines when they fired was well lit showing the pair of Spartans they were expected. Several technicians and launch operators worked at their stations to prep the starfighter for launch.

"Jorge, Six, get to the Sabre before the Covenant wreck it," Carter ordered.

"What about you and Kat?" Jorge replied with concern as the sounds of gunfire and explosions began to drift into the control room.

"Jun's on his way with a Falcon, we'll exfil after you launch," Carter answered to reassure the Spartan II. "Move!"

Jorge hesitated a moment before his instincts kicked in. Finally, the internal struggle ended. "You heard him, Six. Let's go."

"Launch teams, Sabre is prepped and good to go," an Army technician announced urgently.

"You go Six, I'm just a passenger on this one," Jorge confirmed.

Mike raced through the door and towards the launch pad. Moving up the gangway two steps at a time to the gantry he assumed Jorge was behind him. Without a pause he jumped into the YSS-1000 Sabre's cockpit and strapped in while Jorge wedged his bulky frame into the radar intercept officer's seat behind.

The canopy closed as the ramp detached with a loud metallic _thunk_. Deftly tapping several buttons Mike engaged the craft's computer in order to begin the launch sequence.

"Struts disengaged," the Sabre's computer announced. "Commencing launch in T-minus 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, launch."

The Sabre's three engines ignited with a roar and began to lift off. The space plane with swept back wings pulled away from the launch facility with an ear-splitting sound of thunder, defying gravity just as the Falcon carrying the rest of Noble Team arrived for the extraction.

Natalia was out and running to the control facility before the skids touched the ground but she knew she was already too late. The sight of the Sabre leaving the atmosphere greeted her. She wasn't sure what she would have said to Mike, all she knew was she'd wanted to see him.

"He'll be all right," Kat commented reading her mind as the woman entered the room. "He knows what he's doing."

Commander Carter ignored the comment. "All right Noble, load up. We're out of here."

Despite the assurance, Natalia still felt a heaviness in her heart that seemed to be coming on a regular basis. She vowed then and there that if she were given the chance, she would never hold back with him again.

With the Sabre already out of the planet's atmosphere, the Spartans and Natalia left the base to its fate.

With their heading towards the space station designated as Anchor 9 locked in and the Head's-Up-Display showing all clear Mike had the opportunity to relax and look around. It had been a long time since he'd flown like this, years in fact. His had been a brief experience with the Sabre's, being used to insert him into a difficult-to-reach location for a mission. He'd never really had the opportunity to get to fly since the destination and return pattern had been pre-set, so despite the pressure of the mission he determined to enjoy himself. The Spartan took a few minutes to familiarize himself with the controls again, taking the agile starfighter through a series of maneuverers. This was a new sensation, kind of like the pressure of Natalia's hand on his arm, or the warmth when she held his hand. He seemed to be experiencing a lot of new things.

"Noble Actual to Sabre Bravo-oh-two-niner, over," a voice came over

their comms, interrupting Mike's thoughts.

"Copy, Actual. Colonel Holland?" Jorge answered for them.

"Affirmative, Noble Five," Holland confirmed. "Welcome to Operation: UPPERCUT. I'll be your control from here on out."

"Understood, Colonel," Jorge acknowledged.

"Noble Six, these Sabres have been customized for orbital defense; you may need to get reacquainted. Rendezvous at Anchor 9 with the Frigate Savannah and the other Sabres as soon as you're ready. Holland out," their leader ordered as a waypoint to the Navy service, repair and refit station popped up.

"You're all warmed up, Six. We should head for the Savannah," Jorge commented casually. Then his voice became urgent, "Multiple unidentified contacts!"

"Got it," Mike confirmed, "inbound and on an intercept course."

"Savannah Actual to Sabre teams, be advised: we have bogies inbound," the frigate's commander confirmed, breaking in on their channel.

"Anchor 9 to all UNSC ships: station defenses are down," the space platform's communications officers called out urgently. "Requesting combat support until we can bring them back online."

"Here we go, Six," Jorge confirmed. "Show them what you can do!"

Mike toggled the weapon's control system and engaged the target tracking reticule. Taking a deep breath, he wondered if he was up for it.

Multiple Banshees zoomed into the area and were immediately engaged by the flight of Sabres forming up for the mission.

Despite the chaos all around him with ships whizzing past and other pilots calling out targets or for help Mike stayed focused. How found flying and fighting in space easier than expected and soon was taking the lead. The Banshees had no real chance against the superior UNSC fighters and so were quickly eliminated. But that wasn't all. A wave of Covenant Seraphs joined the fray. Tougher than the Banshees, the circular multi-role fighter with twin plasma cannons proved tougher but by this point Anchor 9's defenses were starting to come on line so the added firepower proved too much for the Covenant attackers.

Still, the invaders of Reach weren't ready to give up. A group of heavier Phantom gunships entered in with the intent of taking out Anchor 9. Again, Mike, and the other Sabres that had joined him formed the hub of the station's defense. Despite the aspect of the heavier crafts engaged, with the firepower of the station added to that of the nimble human fighters the entire Covenant force was pushed back.

"You get a feeling they know we're up to something?" Jorge asked from the rear of the cockpit.

"I don't know," Mike mused, "but they sure are active up here. I thought it was bad on the surface."

"Yea, I guess the flyboys don't have it so easy after all," Jorge commented. "Makes me almost feel guilty for all the bad things I think about them."

"Anchor Niner to UNSC ships, all targets neutralized," the station's space traffic co-ordinator called out, "Bravo-oh-two-niner, you are clear to dock. Activating marker."

"Holland to Bravo-oh-two-niner," the colonel broke in. "You ready to go?"

"Affirmative, Colonel," Mike responded.

"All right then. Follow your landing grip. Your package is ready to be loaded," Holland confirmed about the slip-space drive they were about to convert to a bomb.

"I still can't believe we're able to do this," Jorge commented.

"I never knew one of Kat's schemes to not get off the ground," Mike mused. "She's got some weird sixth-sense about this kind of stuff."

"You knew her back on Onyx, huh?"

"Yea, we were in the same training company," Mike reflected back. "We hung out."

"You were friends?"

Mike thought about it for a moment as the large, three-hubbed space station began to fill their view. "Yes, as much as we were allowed to be." He paused and thought about that for a moment. "It's been good to see her again."

"But you and the woman from ONI," the big Spartan II switched carefully, "you got something going?"

Mike almost crashed the Sabre into the side of the naval facility used to service the UNSC fleet on Reach. "What do you mean by that?" he choked out.

"Nothing bad," Jorge confirmed. "I think it's kind of nice. She's okay."

Mike took a breath of relief and paused again. So others could see it too. How could they not? "I don't know. It's complicated. It doesn't matter, there's no time for that stuff."

"You know what? The way things are going, make time," Jorge commented firmly.

The Sabre docked and the conversation ended. It was time to get to work.

Jorge depressurized his cabin in the Sabre then moved out into a zero-gee environment and floated to a waiting Pelican. As Jorge worked to secure the improvised bomb they would use to hopefully destroy the Covenant Supercarrier Long Night of Solace he had Auntie Dot pull up real time actions on Reach, looking in on the bombardment of Sword Base. He and Mike didn't have to talk about it. While Mike may care for Natalia all of a sudden, the tender-hearted Spartan II had been looking in on Doctor Halsey as a son would his mother. The news didn't seem good and that seemed to cause Jorge to become even more reflective.

But there was work to be done so the Spartan never paused, despite his personal feelings, completing what they needed to in order to proceed with the next phase of the operation.

"Bravo-oh-two-niner, you're cleared to re-engage thrusters," the Anchor Nine liaison confirmed.

"Noble Six, this is Holland," the head of the operation called, monitoring from his location.

"Go ahead, Colonel," Mike opened a comms channel.

"We've flagged a Corvette-class vessel on a predicted docking track with our target," Holland reported as Jorge readied the slipspace engine drive with two other Army Troopers.

"Get our makeshift bomb on that Corvette, and we have our delivery system. Noble Five will escort the bomb. I need your Sabre team to clear the way for boarding," Holland ordered.

"Understood, colonel," Mike confirmed, still unsettled by not only the emotions churning within him but now even the conversation he'd had with Jorge about Natalia. With the big Spartan riding with the bomb the Lone Wolf suddenly felt lonely.

"As she's already donated her slipspace drive to the cause, the Savannah will be joining you to provide local fire support," Holland confirmed.

"UNSC Savannah," the frigate's commander joined in. "Our wings may be clipped, but we've got your back."

As Mike and the other Sabres in the party pulled away from Anchor 9 now joined by the Savannah Colonel Holland added, "I've stuck my neck out for Noble on this one, Lieutenant."

"We'll get it done, colonel. Six out." Mike understood the risk to all of them but also the necessity of the operation. There was no turning back. If they didn't succeed the planet would either be overrun or glassed likely before the fleet arrived. It all rested on them.

The Savannah and the Sabres joining Mike winged towards the unsuspecting Covenant vessel. The UNSC frigate jammed the ship's communications and then they pounced. The SDV-class heavy corvette responded slowly to the attack, seeming to not believe the humans would attack the light capital warship with such a small force. While the Covenant craft leadership seemed to ponder this, the human

attackers took out their aft engines to slow the retreating corvette. The Sabres supported by the Savannah's close combat weapon's system eliminated not only the fighter screen protecting it but also a squadron of fighters that seemed to stumble into the fight from a routine patrol.

Satisfied they'd eliminated the corvette's fighter escort the tricky part of actually boarding the Covenant warship and taking control of it came next.

"Dot, analyze all available data on that Corvette. Find a way inside," Colonel Holland ordered.

In a millisecond the AI assessed and reported back, "Scans indicate a structural weakness surrounding a platform on top of the vessel."

"Noble Six, set down immediately on that Corvette's topside landing pad," Holland ordered.

Mike saw the waypoint set and dipped his Sabre towards it. Now was the time to put theory to the test of reality. "Echo team with me, let's get us an LZ. Noble Five, hold until we've secured an entry point."

"Roger that," Jorge responded.

Mike led four other Sabres to the landing pad and hopped out with several Army Troopers in vacuum sealed suits. The hull of the corvette had been ruptured in the initial attack so not only had oxygen been bled from this area of the ship but also pressurization.

"Noble Six, the Savannah's counter-measures won't work forever. Find a way inside, and permanently disable the cruiser's communications," Holland ordered. "As soon as we're sure the Corvette can't squawk we'll initiate UPPERCUT phase two."

Mike signalled the others towards a shield on the platform leading to a lower level. The way in was shown to them when a single Sangheili Ranger in light green armor emerged from under it. Still disoriented from the attack the Elite was quickly eliminated by Mike and the troopers backing him up.

Passing through the shield the human attackers found that whatever Covenant were without vacuum-sealed armor have died as bodies were slumped at their stations where they'd been working. But that didn't mean all were gone. Several Grunts and more Elite Rangers were in the area. Again though, not expecting this type of attack and outmatched by the motivated UNSC attackers they were quickly dispatched. Immediately Mike found a communications relay in the landing area and with the help of Auntie Dot was able to disable it, blacking the Covenant ship out from the rest of the fleet.

They'd made it on board against all odds. Looking around to ensure they could hold the landing pad, Mike was satisfied they had a moment to consolidate. "Noble Actual, we're in," Mike reported. "Ship is black."

"Good work Six," the colonel confirmed. "Holland to Savannah, enemy

comm relay is now offline."

"Copy that," the frigate's commander confirmed. "Halting counter-measures, diverting all power and personnel to weapons."

"Alright, Noble." They could hear Colonel Holland breath heavily in relief. "Let's get that Slipspace bomb on board. Six, head for the hangar. Noble Five, meet 'em there."

"Affirmative, on approach," Jorge confirmed.

Moving with the troopers backing him up, still in the depressurized environment, Mike travelled quickly to the hangar to secure a spot for Jorge and the Pelican to land.

Rather than what they'd found on entry, here a large number of Covenant troops had massed and were organized to defend the critical entry point. It appeared as if the Covenant had figured out what the human's intent was.

Without hesitation Mike and the troopers backing him up charged into the room. Using the low-gravity environment Mike was not only able to bob and weave but jump and float among the mixed array of Grunts and Elites. But despite the best efforts of the human attackers, the Spartan included, they weren't able to make any headway in securing the landing bay. It seemed as if even the lowly Grunts had some form of overshield protecting them from attack. The advantage allowed the defenders of the corvette to rally and counter-attack. Several of the UNSC troopers went down in a hail of plasma bolts and needler rounds. The situation was becoming desperate for Mike. To get this close and then lose was not an option for the competitive Spartan. But try as he would, they couldn't overcome the shielding. A few Grunts had been taken out but the Elites in particular seemed impervious despite the rate of fire he laid on them. Any time Mike tried to move in they would fall back behind a shield of Grunts and fire from cover. Mike swore in fury, angry at the circumstances.

"Six, go for those shield controls. I need in," Jorge called urgently over the comms.

Mike took a quick look outside through the blue-green transparent shield blocking the hangar bay. He could see the Pelican hovering outside carrying Jorge and the bomb while the Savannah mixed it up with the corvette's anti-ship defenses.

Something needed to be done or their desperate mission would be prematurely terminated.

Suddenly, what happened mattered.

For years he hadn't cared if he lived or died. He was an automaton, reacting and doing what he'd been told. He'd been a robot on a pre-set course of killing, a UNSC tool like a screw driver. But now he knew that was a lie. He had a purpose and it wasn't solely destruction. He had feelings; he mattered to people and to himself. Spartan B-312, no, Mike Nantz, the Lone Wolf, was not about to roll over and let it all end here. He would accept and live out his family legacy. He would fight.

19. Chapter 19

****Chapter 19****

****August 16, 2552 08:48 Hours, Covenant Corvette Ardent Prayer, in orbit around Planet Reach****

Scanning around the hangar Mike finally found what he was looking for. A Huragok 'engineer' floated up close to the ceiling of the two story area. The squid-like creature's multiple tentacles danced through the air like a conductor while it floated around using several gas bladders for propulsion. Mike could tell this odd-looking Covenant worker was somehow creating the powerful overshield and he needed to eliminate it or they'd lose the fight.

The Covenant defenders could almost smell the victory as another two troopers went down. They massed to engage Mike giving him the opportunity he needed. With a mighty leap he used the low gravity environment to shoot up in the air. Using a pillar as leverage he pushed off and sailed through the air across the hangar right towards the gaseous Huragok.

Too late the Elites in particular realized the threat and reacted seeking to stop the counter move of the Spartan. Mike let loose a stream of armor-piercing rounds from his MA37 which went right through the Engineer. While a squeal the creature collapsed and hit the ground.

Not only did the overshields of the defenders drop but the hangar began to repressurize. Surprised by the turn of events the Covenant reacted slowly to the loss of their tactical advantage. The scales evened, the human attackers seized the initiative quickly overwhelming the corvette's protectors. In several minutes all lay dead on the metal surface of the hangar.

Mike raced up a winding staircase to the shield controls and deftly turned them off. The transparent barrier dropped allowing the Pelican to enter the bay.

While the UNSC Savannah continued to engage the Corvette Jorge and several army troopers emerged out of the craft.

"Powder keg is aboard, Colonel," Noble Five reported.

"Copy that," Holland confirmed. "Six, get your fire team to the bridge. The Corvette's refueling run will have to be initiated manually. Find the NAV controls and get that Corvette moving toward the Supercarrier."

"Yes, sir," Mike responded, taking a moment to survey the carnage in the hangar bay, thankful they'd made it this far. "I need an upload of the ship's schematics."

"Got it," Holland affirmed, "sending it now."

"Five, stay with the bomb. And discourage the curious," Holland added.

"My pleasure," Jorge affirmed. "Hear that, Lieutenant? I'll be all by

my lonesome back here. Make it quick, would ya?"

Mike picked the troopers that would go with him from the reinforcements Jorge had brought on the Pelican while stocking up on ammo that was being off-loaded from the Pelican. Then, pulling up the ship schematic he found the bridge and marked a waypoint to it. With everyone in place he moved towards a bulkhead door that led towards the bridge.

"Everyone ready?" he asked, taking a deep breath. Those with him nodded grimly, knowing the task before them.

Mike opened the door into an area that was still pressurized and filled with Covenant waiting for them. The defenders of the corvette put up a thick blanket of fire, pushing the human attackers back initially. A screen of Jackals held the line while Grunts waded into to upset the humans formation. As always Elites looked for areas of opportunity.

Knowing time was of the essence, rather than try to finesse their way in Mike threw two grenades in quick succession and charged in, trusting his shields to protect him. With the troopers finding cover in his wake the tactic did the job. They were able to break the Covenant line and then systematically grind up the hasty defense.

"We're clear, let's move," Mike called urgently to his team.

"Securing door behind you," Jorge confirmed over the comms.

Clear for the moment they began to head down the corridor tracking with the NAV point that showed their objective.

"Savannah to Holland," the frigate's commander called urgently, "sustaining major structural damage! We need to break off, colonel!"

"Copy, Savannah. Our team is in, disengage!" Noble Actual confirmed.

Mike paused for a moment and the trooper behind him almost collided with him.

"Sir?" he asked in confusion.

Mike had already looked at the schematic and made his choice. "The plasma battery fire control is close. We're going to help the Savannah."

"You sure about this?" the Army sergeant questioned, confused a Spartan would go off mission like that.

Mike didn't answer. Decision made he'd already gone. Taking a left turn he came towards a three-part blast door. Without hesitating he bulled his way into the room to find the unsuspecting Sangheili gunners. He could see through the room outside the window the gunners intently looking through multiple plasma bolts impacting the fleeing frigate. Explosions began to blossom along the Savannah's hull as Mike opened fire on the gunners.

"Break off! Break off!" the Savannah's commander could be heard screaming over the comms. "Hull breach, reactors flaring! Dammit, I'm losing her!"

It was too late. As the last gunner fell to Mike's onslaught the frigate fragmented and then exploded at its mid-section.

"Savannah Actual, can you hear me?" Colonel Holland called urgently.

All Mike could do was stare at the shattered fragments starting to fall towards Reach.

"Frigate's gone," Jorge finally reported since he'd heard Mike's decision and saw the frigate's destruction. "Six... Nothing we can do," he added gently to Mike.

"Noble, you're in deep with no cover," Holland refocused the pair. "Get that corvette moving and get the hell outta there!"

With a snarl Mike slammed a fresh magazine into his assault rifle and sprinted back down the corridor looking for Covenant. Yet again he'd been too late to make a difference and now he'd stood helplessly watching hundreds more die that he could have stopped. Despite everything going on, Mike felt the pang of loss; no wonder he'd lived behind the façade of the Lone Wolf. It hurt, bad, and he wanted to hurt back. The remaining crew of this vessel would pay.

Moving through a winding corridor the assault force quickly came to another thick blast door without opposition.

"Looks like the bridge, sir," the sergeant with Mike pointed out. "Let's clear it out for the Savannah," he added, voice thick with emotion.

Like a whirlwind Mike and the team moved through the opening door onto the bridge. Leading with a grenade, Mike followed up melee attacking more than he shot. Though his rifle would have been quicker and more efficient the image of the burning Savannah going down had been seared in his mind and so only the fury of beating the life out of the alien attackers of Reach would dampen it. The intensity of the assault overwhelmed the Grunts on the bridge and they tried to flee. Mike showed no compassion, systematically hunting down and eliminating them.

A gold armored Elite General roared a challenge but Mike didn't flinch at the intimidating foe. Instead he charged in and caught the Sangheili in mid-challenge, driving his shoulder into the larger foe. The Elite's breath came out with the whoosh but the seasoned warrior reacted quickly despite the attack. Grappling with Mike he picked him up despite the weight of the Spartan's armor and threw him to the deck. Igniting a Plasma Sword the Elite dove towards Mike who rolled after the throw into a crouch. Seeing the Covenant attacker charging in hard he kicked out an armored boot into the shin of the Sangheili causing the large creature to lose balance and fall down. Mike responded quickly, jumping on top of the general and savagely beating away with the butt of his assault rifle without mercy until the commander was dead.

As this was going on Mike's fire team efficiently cleared the rest of the bridge. They now effectively had control of the ship.

"Noble Actual, this is Six," Mike called. "We have control of the bridge."

"Move, Lieutenant! Put that Corvette on a refueling track to the Supercarrier," Holland came back urgently.

Mike quickly found the Nav controls and punched in the co-ordinates he'd been given for a course to the Long Night of Solace. Satisfied he'd done what was needed, the Spartan stepped back from the panel.

"Well done, Noble Six. UPPERCUT initiated, Corvette is underway," the colonel congratulated Mike.

Jorge cut in on the team channel. "Six, our ride outta here is taking heavy fire! Get back to the hangar!" he called urgently over the comms.

Mike did a quick assessment of the situation and came to a decision. "All right, the rest of you back to the Sabres," he ordered the remainder of his fire team. "Get clear of the Supercarrier and the blast radius."

"What about you, sir?" the sergeant who'd been with him throughout asked, hesitating to break now.

"I'll get to Noble Five and meet you back at Anchor Nine," Mike responded resolutely.

Rather than moving right away, the Army troopers formed up and saluted the Lone Wolf. "Thank you for letting us be part of this," the leader of the group said genuinely.

The party split and Mike moved quickly back towards the hangar to support Jorge. Before he reached it fresh Covenant troops engaged him, trying to keep him from the bay. But fighting through without stopping to engage those left in his wake he was able to make it back to his friend.

The sight was not promising.

Jorge, by this time, stood alone under heavy attack. The mixture of Grunts and lower level Elites were caught off guard by the arrival of the additional Spartan. Fighting desperately with a ticking clock the two members of Noble Team were able to clear the hangar in short order.

"Good of you to come, hostiles are pounding the hell outta the Pelican," Jorge reported, using the break in action to reload his heavy machine gun.

The respite was short lived. Blue plasma bolts sizzled through the air as a fresh wave of Covenant troops tried to take the hangar.

With Jorge working as an anchor around the Pelican Mike moved freely through the rest of the large area scattering Grunts, bulling through

the shield defenses of Jackals and targeting the always dangerous Elites. Though the alien invaders had superior numbers they seemed uncoordinated so despite being reinforced they still were not able to use that to their advantage against the pair of Spartans.

With the HMG cutting through the attackers like a scythe and Mike systematically eliminating the threat the pair from Noble Team were able to eventually eliminate all of Covenant forces. If there were any more defenders on the ship it was unknown, but for the time being there seemed to be none willing to tangle with the deadly Spartans.

Preparing to escape, Jorge and Mike looked at the damage done to the Pelican sitting in the landing bay during the last attack. The ship wasn't going anywhere.

"Savannah did a number on the door," Jorge reported, looking around at alternatives. "There's no way back up to the Sabres," Jorge reported. "Noble Six, form up on me," he called.

Mike trotted over to the big Spartan II. "Times running out, we need to set the bomb and exfil." Pulling up the ship's schematic he found them a route out. "We can double back towards the bridge then break off and make it to the landing pad. There's still time," he stated emphatically.

"All right then, let's do it," Jorge responded with relief.

"Distance is closing on this vessel's refueling track with the Covenant Supercarrier. Seventy-six seconds to endpoint," Auntie Dot cut in, reporting impassively.

"Come on Jorge," Mike responded, an edge to his voice. "Let's start the countdown and bug out. I don't want to get a sun burn when this thing goes up."

Jorge moved to arm the timer for the bomb made out of the slipspace drive engine but took longer than expected, trying several times. "Damn it... So, it's gonna be like that," he said quietly.

Mike had been covering the hangar in case there were any Covenant stragglers but then he saw Jorge hit the timer in frustration. "What's going on?" he asked in concern.

"Well, I got good news and bad news," Jorge responded. "This bird took some fire and her thruster gimbal is toast. Which means the only way off this slag heap is gravity."

"And the good news?" Mike asked feeling his heart drop.

"That was the good news."

"At current velocity, fifty-three seconds to endpoint," Auntie Dot pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jorge grumbled.

The big Spartan II removed his helmet and let it drop to the floor, landing near his feet. Mike could tell by the expression on his face

he wasn't joking around.

"Bad news is the timer's fried. I'm gonna have to fire it manually," Jorge reported grimly.

"That's a one way trip," Mike shot back, moving closer to grip Jorge's forearm.

"We all make it sooner or later," Noble Five responded though his face betrayed a hint of emotion. "Better get going, Six, they're gonna need you down there." He paused for a few seconds, as if considering something. "Listen, Reach has been good to me. Time has come to return the favor."

Jorge began to remove his dog tags but Mike stopped him.

"Come on man, this is crazy! There has to be another way," Mike protested.

"There isn't." Jorge grasped Mike's hand and shoved his dog tags in it. "Don't deny me this."

Mike churned with internal conflict. Part of him wanted to take Jorge's place, knowing the Spartan II was the better man and deserved to live. He'd seen that in the weeks they'd been together. He should have died a dozen times before, in some ways he even wanted to.

But that was only one part.

The other part wanted to live, desperately wanted to. For the first time he thought he had something to live for-Natalia.

In the gridlock of indecision Jorge lifted Mike up with one hand and carried him to the hangar's shield door. Mike hung limp, no longer resisting, the conflict raging within taking over control of his body.

"Tell 'em to make it count," Jorge declared and tossed Mike out of the hangar door and into space.

"No!" Mike screamed as he began to fall back towards Reach.

Back on the planet the rest of Noble Team had been monitoring the team communication's channel and following the progress of the raid.

"What the hell just happened? " Kat shouted.

"I don't know," Carter responded grimly, not wanting to look at anyone, fearing the worst.

Standing alone on the corvette with Auntie Dot counting down to zero Jorge looked out into the beauty of space and the melancholy he was feeling left. A smile lit up his face. "Beautiful," he whispered then hit the button activating the bomb.

Mike free fell back towards the planet. Despite the lack of gravity in space there was just enough to bring him back towards the surface. Looking up he saw the Covenant corvette dwarfed by the gargantuan supercarrier it was automatically moving up towards. Settling into

the massive center bay the smaller vessel paused for a moment then with a white flash it erupted.

They'd hit the right mark.

A slipspace rift opened up right in the center of the Long Night of Solace igniting the fuel pods in the supercarrier and with first a blue-purple blast that mushroomed out into space the rift opened up the bigger vessel which split it in two. Mike locked his armor as the shockwave from the explosion hit him, driving him towards the planet below.

We did it Jorge, Mike thought to himself. _You made it count. Now we can win this thing_, the usually reserved Spartan thought to himself optimistically, body spasming involuntarily with the mixed emotions of the moment. While the impact on the ground at this velocity did worry him he was confident his MJOLINIR armor would protect him and what was damaged could be fixed with Biofoam. No, he would live since now he began to feel like he had something to live for.

A smile filled the Lone Wolf's face despite the loss of one he'd come to think of as a friend. Even remorse was a welcome emotion from his years of feeling nothing. He wasn't a machine, he was a man, despite everything that had been done to him and he'd experienced. He was a man with emotions, feelings; one who was capable of caring. He cared that Jorge had sacrificed his life for his, had given it for Reach, and he cared about Natalia, despite what her last name was. He'd live.

I'll make it count, Mike pledged to himself and to Jorge.

Then a sudden flash of white light in the distance caught his attention followed by another and another accompanied by a sudden rupturing noise that disturbed the quiet of space.

Back on Reach the rest of Noble Team stood silently around the data terminal they'd huddled by. While the rest of the staff in the base headquarters cheered happily at the destruction of the supercarrier they were unsure how to respond.

"Dot, sitrep on the team," Commander Carter asked their AI grimly.

"Scanning," she responded.

Natalia gripped her hands until they ached, conflicted herself but in a different way. Yet despite her fear, she knew he was alive, that he'd come back to her, that they'd have a chance to explore their feelings. The destruction of the supercarrier and the arrival of their fleet meant they would win this fight and there would be a future.

"Regrettably Commander the neural signal of Noble Five is terminated," Auntie Dot reported, it seemed even with emotion in her artificial voice. "It appears as if he was lost when the slipspace drive was ruptured."

"Jorge is gone?" Emile cried out, voice breaking.

"And Noble Six?" Carter asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"He ejected from the craft before destruction and is now in a freefall pattern towards the planet."

"He WHAT?" Natalia interjected, forgetting not only protocol but her tough façade.

"I said Lt. Commander Misriah that he is in a freefall towards the planet," the AI reported.

"That can't be!" Natalia protested, feeling woozy, as Kat put a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"Warning, slipspace rupture detected," Auntie Dot cut in with a note of urgency. The AI brought on screen the feed from a camera mounted on one of the NAV Beacons surrounding the planet, which showed multiple Covenant ships dropping out of slipspace.

"Comms on speaker Dot," Carter ordered. "We need to find out what's going on."

The AI kept the video images coming up from the beacons but added the audio commentary from the various UNSC Navy sensor operators on the planet.

"Gamma Station Control, reading multiple pings below the Orbital Defense Grid," one of the operators called out.

"Slipspace rupture detected," Auntie Dot reported as another than another Covenant craft appeared at the planet.

"Yeah, we're picking up anomalies too," another naval crewman confirmed.

"Are you reading this?" the Anchor 9 controller called out on the net.

In transfixed horror the members of Noble Team on the ground and the personnel in the HQ stopped what they were doing to watch the horrific scene of more and more Covenant ships dropping out of slipspace.

"Multiple Covenant signatures!" Anchor 9's operator shouted. "Does anyone have a visual?"

"They're everywhere!" Naval operator ATC-1 screamed.

As the sounds of shouts and screams could be heard overwhelming the communications channel, turning it into white noise the navigation beacon they'd been pulling the video feed from went fuzzy then black as 'SIGNAL LOST' came up.

"Must be the whole damn Covenant fleet!" Colonel Holland interjected on the team network. "Noble Team, standby for new operational orders. The whole situation has changed."

****Chapter 20****

****August 16, 1126 hours, Somewhere in Eposz Territory, Planet Reach****

Freefalling through space was an odd sensation for Mike. Though he'd done high level jumps in the past there had never been anything like this. Plummeting towards Reach at an increasing velocity was both exhilarating and terrifying. The explosion of the long Night of Solace caused by the slipspace eruption had been a breathtaking spectacle and Mike had taken a moment to consider the cost of Jorge's sacrifice as worthwhile until the pinpricks of light blossomed into an enormous Covenant fleet coming out of slipspace.

Blessing to curse in a matter of minutes.

Now the sacrifice of the kind-hearted Spartan II seemed like a perverse joke. Still plunging to the planet as the Covenant vessels prepared to decimate the planetary defenses Mike almost wanted to pop his armor and die in space.

Almost.

He wanted to live, he wanted to fight on and he wanted to see Natalia. Mike Nantz wasn't ready to give up yet.

Screaming through the atmosphere faster than a Pelican the Lone Wolf braced himself for the inevitable force of impact. Despite the re-entry pack he wore which theoretically should slow his descent it was still theoretical. From the distance he was falling he prayed he'd survive the coming savage collision.

Back on Reach, at the Special Operations Headquarters the arrival of the Covenant fleet had thrown the place into pandemonium for all but Noble Team. While they mourned already the loss of one teammate they doggedly worked to determine the status of the other.

"Auntie Dot scan planetary atmosphere belt for a neural signal matching Spartan B-312," Commander Carter ordered briskly.

For some reason the AI didn't respond.

"Dot, do you read me? This is a direct order," Carter growled.

"I heard you the first time Commander," Auntie Dot shot back somewhat testily. "I am involved with other matters more pertinent to the defense of Reach and am not available for such requests."

"You can do a thousand things at once," the leader of Noble Team growled. "Don't tell me you can't do it."

"I did not say I could not do it," she corrected, "rather I am not able to due to other priority taskings."

Rather than argue with the testy AI Carter turned to a communications technician scanning the planetary atmosphere. "All right then, I want you to scan for the Spartan I just mentioned."

"Sir, I can't do that," the tech answered, avoiding eye contact. Seeing the other Spartans of Noble Team press in aggressively the

slender soldier explained, "I'm not authorized to access those schematics. I don't know what to search for."

Before the twenty-something technician had finished Carter had already switched channels to Colonel Holland. "Noble Actual, this is Noble Lead, I request immediate uplink to this location of diagnostic signature for Noble Six."

"You have got to be kidding, Lead," Holland responded in exasperated surprise. "We've got a little more to worry about right now than one missing Spartan."

The statement sent a chill through all the team, including Natalia. She couldn't believe how quickly one of their members could be forgotten and then Mike's words to her a few days earlier caused a chill.

Disposable soldiers.

Her first instinctive thought was her father needed to hear about this but then she realized she was on Reach and out of communications. Then a grimmer reality set in. He would likely agree. Anger flared within the independent-minded woman and she determined to change that if ever given the chance.

"Sir, Iâ€|," Carter tried to counter.

"Negative Noble Lead," Holland cut him off coldly. "Your team is to standby for immediate insertion where needed on five minutes' notice. Actual out."

"Damn it," Emile swore, denting a steel filing case with a punch.

"I'll find him," Kat declared. Shoving the corporal out of the way without a word she sat down and rapidly began punching a series of numbers into the computer. No one spoke. The technician didn't dare move from the spot he'd been unceremoniously dumped onto the floor. It took her less than two minutes.

"Got it!" she declared triumphantly. "I got his transponder code."

"Okay, so where is he?" Carter asked grimly.

Tapping a new series of keys Kat replied, "Just switching overâ€|okayâ€|" She paused, looking bleak.

"So, what is it?" Emile asked.

"He's still in a free fall."

"A what?" Natalia interjected, not caring about protocol.

"Trajectory shows he ejected somehow from the supercarrier before it imploded. There was no intercept from Sabres or other craft. He's coming through the atmosphere and will land somewhere aroundâ€|.here," Noble Two pointed to an area tactical map she brought up.

"You mean when he splatters," Emile countered grimly. "From that distance? Guys dog meat."

"Don't say that!" Natalia exploded, slamming into Noble Four. Despite the smaller size her force was enough to cause the bigger Spartan to stagger back and fall hard into the wall.

"Whoa, back off lady," Emile spat out, hands coming up into a fighting position. "I'm just stating reality."

"Yea well we don't need that kind of reality right now," she spat back. But Natalia couldn't continue the assault; it had taken everything out of her. She felt as if someone had ratcheted her heart into a vise grip and could barely stand. Eyes flooding with tears a panic attack at the declaration began to envelope her like a blanket.

Rather than continue to heated discussion Emile allowed the conversation to end there. In fact he actually looked at the ONI officer with a note of acceptance for the first time.

"That may not necessarily be true," Jun countered quietly. "He probably had a re-entry pack on."

Emile shrugged but said nothing, still looking warily at Natalia who was still in shock over the whole thing.

"Besides, MJOLINIR is rated for high impact," the sniper added.

"That high?" Emile asked skeptically but now more subdued by the emotion of the interchange.

"Doesn't matter." Kat cut in definitively. "We go and get him where he lands." She then turned and looked directly at Commander Carter for affirmation.

"Even if where he's landing is over a day away by land vehicle from here?" Emile countered.

"Pelican can get there a lot faster," Jun added quietly. "We can be there and back in a few hours."

The leader of Noble Team weighed his responsibility to the chain of command and the orders he'd been given to stand by. "Screw it," he spat out. "Saddle up, we're heading to that grid to get Six."

Emile whooped but it was short lived.

"Noble Actual to Noble Lead," Colonel Holland called over the comms. Without waiting for acknowledgement he commanded, "You are ordered to immediately move to New Alexandria and assist with the protection of the space elevators in that area. Falcon Charlie Four is warmed up and ready to go. I want you in the air and moving in three minutes. Got that?"

Commander Carter paused for a moment and chewed his lip. This was a direct order. "Understood, Noble Team is moving. Lead out."

"You can't, sir," Emile protested.

"We need to get Six," Kat declared emphatically.

"I didn't say no one would go get him, only that we would be moving out." Seeing the confusion on the rest of the team, he looked directly at Natalia. "Lt. Commander Misriah, while you've been part of Noble Team throughout your time on Reach under Winter Contingency ONI personnel fall under their own directive. So unless you receive orders for your higher command you are to use your discretion in terms of how you serve the greater good."

"Meaningâ€¦," Natalia started to get his drift.

"Meaning the orders from Colonel Holland don't apply to you," Carter declared. "Draw ammo and rations. You're going on your own to pick up Six." He paused and looked directly at her. "That is if you're up to it."

Natalia's piercing eyes narrowed then flared causing the usually stoic Spartan to involuntarily take a step back in surprise. "You better believe I'm going."

"Good. I thought you would." The leader of Noble team paused and then added soberly, "Better take a health kit too."

She nodded but didn't say anything, understanding the implications of the statement.

"Go get Mike, Natalia," Kat encouraged.

"Yea, bring our boy home, Noble Seven," Emile added as Jun nodded his head in agreement.

Despite her confused state over Mike's condition she could have burst out crying at this. The team wanted her to do this for them. Slapping a fresh magazine into her assault rifle she responded, "I'll bring him back. I won't let you down."

Moving towards the landing area of the base, Kat walked beside Natalia. Handing her a small transponder she told her, "This will give you a reading on where he landing based on his trajectory but it's not strong enough to pick him up other than that. If he had a reentry pack on there'll be a distress signal you can pick up once you get closer. Don't give up hope. The Wolf's a survivor, he'll come through this," she declared optimistically. Then her eyes got a twinkle in them and she added, "Besides, he needs to live long enough for me to see you declare your undying love for him. I need to see his reaction."

Natalia turned beet red at the comment but was happy for the help and the tacit endorsement from the protective Spartan.

The conversation ended as the team stopped at the duty officer's station at the motor pool of the base. "I need a driver and Warthog for a short-term mission to take this person to a designated area for the retrieval of one of my team members," Commander Carter declared.

"How short?" the young lieutenant sitting behind the desk asked

warily.

"Two days tops."

"Sorry sir," the junior officer managing the post responded officiously. "I have no orders for such a tasking."

"We have a Spartan coming in for a hard landing, he might be hurt. We need to evac him," Carter explained.

"I'd like to help you sir but my hands are tied," the lieutenant answered bureaucratically.

Natalia bulled past Carter and eyes blazing declared, "I'm Lt. Commander Misriah of ONI Section 1. I directly work for Admiral Parangovsky. This is a priority mission lieutenant."

The name and office clearly intimidated the young man which set him into gridlock. "I'm not sure ma'amâ€|under Winter Contingency, I meanâ€|"

"What's going on here, sir?" a grizzled sergeant interjected himself into the conversation. "What do I hear about Spartans needing a hand?"

"We need transport to take the lieutenant-commander here to pick up one of our team, sergeant. He's coming in hard on a freefall and we want to get him back," Commander Carter explained.

"The hell you say?" The sergeant responded with surprise. Then glaring at the officer with thinly veiled contempt, added, "That's all?" The senior NCO looked around then turned to Carter, "She can take Foxtrot 5-5." Calling to two troopers standing nearby he ordered, "Brown, Shoemaker, you escort this pretty lady to wherever they need to go and bring their boy back," he barked.

"But sergeant, we can'tâ€|," the lieutenant sputtered.

"Listen El-Tee," the sergeant cut him off briskly. "Spartans have saved our asses more times than you go years in you. We got lots of 'hogs sitting around doing nothin' right now. Least we can do is lend a hand."

With clenched fists on his hips the combat veteran dared the young officer to contradict him. Predictably, the younger man gave way to the veteran's wisdom. "Okay, release the vehicle," he declared meekly.

"Good idea, sir," the sergeant agreed, smiling broadly. "Get moving."

Commander Carter grabbed Natalia by the arm as she prepared to swing into action. He looked at her hard for a moment, as if determining if she was up to the trust he'd placed in her. With a slight nod of the head in affirmation he said, "Stay focused Misriah, you're on your own now. Once you pick up Noble Six RV with us in New Alexandria. Good luck."

Natalia took a deep breath, feeling the weight of expectation on her shoulders but she felt up to it perhaps for the first time in her

life.

As Natalia and the two army trooper cleared the base Mike hit the ground like a meteor despite the small parachute that had deployed from the M-SPEC Reentry Pack. The speed caused it to shred, not slowing him down and everything went blinding white for him. He lay there for he wasn't sure how long. Every bone in his body hurt and he was certain he'd blacked out but wasn't sure for how long. The mission clock continued to run but he hadn't checked it for a while. It wasn't relevant. The image of his last conversation with Jorge filled him and his eyes began to tear up. Pain beyond the physical coursed through his body. Still, he had feelings, even it is was hurt but that had a note of significance for him.

He was alive.

Rolling painfully onto an elbow, Mike then got onto one knee, his body screaming in protest, but through sheer will he was going to do this. Shakily he got to his feet and stood there for a minute trying to not only get oriented to the terrain, his sensor array and GPS could do that for him, but rather he paused to take a deep breath before he carried on.

A light layer of snow crunched under his boots in the barren mountainous landscape as he moved with a limp over to the casing of the reentry pack that had been ripped off him when he hit the ground. Mike opened it up and pulled out a pistol noticing the homing signal was blinking as active.

Instinctively he knew he was on his own. With the arrival of the Covenant fleet his recovery wasn't going to be a priority to anyone. He was a lone wolf once more.

Despite the energy shield given him by the safety device he knew his leg was fractured and likely his left shoulder was dislocated along with some internal injuries. Still, he'd fallen hundreds of kilometers from space and was still alive. That was a miracle.

Unlike Jorge.

The image of the kind-hearted Spartan standing in the landing bay of the Corvette and then it lighting up was like a strait jacket for Mike. He felt no pain despite his injuries. Check that. He felt no physical pain but his heart was pummeled and he had no will to continue.

Come on Mike he thought to himself. _Got to get back in the game. Got to make it count._

Then he was reminded of the dozens of Covenant warships he'd watched jump out of slipspace as he fell.

It's hopeless.

His mind and his heart waged a savage war against each other, causing him not to move.

Don't matter. You're still here and you can still fight. Make it count.

Mike thought about it for a moment as he looked at the remains of the Long Night of Solace crashed on a distant mountain range. Though it was miles away, the size of the enormous vessel made it look like he could reach out and touch it.

It's not over. You have something to live for.

Mike pondered that for a moment. The impossibility made him only whisper it in his mind. Still, it was a whisper and it wasn't impossible. He needed to find out.

The decision made, he enabled a Biofoam injection to stabilize his condition. Despite the feeling of thousands of tiny ants crawling all over his damaged areas he began to feel a sense of relief.

Next he hobbled over to a rock jutting ten feet out of the ground. Taking a deep breath he slammed his left shoulder into the immovable object. A sickening pop could be heard despite the armor covering it and Mike yelped in pain but the shoulder popped back into the socket.

Got to get out of here. Covvies will be all over this soon.

Checking his map he saw an entry for a small town several miles away. Setting a waypoint he racked a shell into the Magnum and began to limp away. Suddenly, the Lone Wolf, who'd fought alone for years, felt lonely.

Natalia continued to pray like she'd never done before as she bumped along in the charging Warthog for the better part of the day. The two UNSC Army personnel didn't speak to the brooding ONI officer until they needed to stop for the night. Finding what looked like an abandoned farm complex Corporal Brown slowed down and pulled up the short lane from the dirt road they'd been following towards a distant mountain range through the drab landscape.

"Why are we stopping?" Natalia asked the trooper harshly as she clued in to what was going on.

"We need to hold up for the night, ma'am," the redheaded soldier answered carefully, sensing the brewing rage within the woman.

"No way, we press on to the objective," Natalia shot back.

Corporal Brown picked his words carefully. "It's going to be dark within the hour. Travelling at night isn't smart, too many Covvies around. We'll pull out at first light and roll up to your man's location by mid-morning."

Natalia was unmoved by the suggestion. "I don't care if we have to fight a Covenant battle group. We don't stop, that's an order. I'm not leaving Mike—Noble Six, out alone at night."

Private Shoemaker got an angry look on his hard face and opened his mouth to speak but Brown cut him off. "To be honest ma'am, I'm fried. So is Brown. We've been driving all day and we need a rest. We're good to no one in our condition right now."

The woman used to getting her way thought to rebut and push her point but paused. She saw the fatigue in the eyes of the driver and fear in the gunner. The three of them were in no-man's land, alone and with the sun going down. Despite her concern for Mike she needed to start to think of others not just herself.

"Okay, you're right. We hold up here until first light," she affirmed. Hearing Private Shoemaker let out a breath of relief she added. "You're right. I'm sorry for the way I treated you."

Corporal Brown was taken again aback by the genuineness of the apology from the ONI officer. "No problem. You're concerned about your team member. That's unusual for someone from your division." He stopped then thought for a moment, cautiously adding, "It's kind of nice actually to see someone from ONI care about the grunts."

With that he walked away to sweep the perimeter and make sure they would be secure for the night while Private Shoemaker refueled from one of the jerry cans they carried.

Natalia was left with her thoughts. _Care? Is that how the soldiers think about us? Of course they do Tali. Wake up. You know the rep of ONI. You always have, you just didn't care because you're a spoiled little rich girl. Oh God, if I ever get out of this, things are going to change._

The night passed uneventfully and as promised, at first light the trio were up and moving. Eating a quick meal of field rations they got underway under thick cloud cover that threatened rain after Corporal Brown checked for an update from headquarters though communications was starting to get spotty. Then they moved on towards their waypoint.

For the remaining few hours the Warthog driver didn't take his eyes off the road while Private Shoemaker swiveled back and forth behind the LAAG, wary of attack, not speaking. As the mission progressed the soldier became increasingly quiet, his unhappiness with the tasking becoming more evident. They'd been told the Covenant were already landing fresh troops all over Reach from the new armada so none knew when they would be engaged. Natalia didn't care. She had a laser-like focus on one thing-find Mike.

As promised, by mid-morning the trio was rolling up to the crest of a mountain range. In the distance the smoldering remains of a crashed Covenant capital ship dominated the skyline.

"Okay ma'am, we're in the right grid," Corporal Brown confirmed, checking the scrolling map display in the dashboard of the Warthog. "What have you got for me?"

Natalia checked the transceiver unit Kat had given her before she left the base and to her delight she picked up a clear distress signal in the area. "I've got it!" she declared triumphantly. "Setting new waypoint."

"We're less than a klick out," Brown reported, then his brow furrowed. "Shoe, keep your eyes peeled," he called out to the gunner, "I'm getting some hostile IFF pings on the outer edge of the grid."

The mark set based on Noble Six's M-SPEC Reentry Pack distress signal was now less than a kilometer away and Natalia began to feel her heartbeat accelerating. What would they find? But one thing kept running through her mind â€"he was alive. She couldn't quantify it, couldn't prove it, but she had hope and that drove her on. She was going to save Mike and prove to the team and to him she belonged. She'd share her love for him and despite the chaos of war swirling around them it would be okay. Her heart began to beat faster in anticipation of the meeting to come and she wet her lips at the thought. This was her moment, when it all came together.

Dirt churning behind, the Warthog climbed a small rise to a plateau where the signal originated. Natalia gripped the health kit she'd stowed down near her feet, ready to spring into action to help Mike. Cresting the top her heart began to race with anticipation until it dropped at the sight greeting them.

No one was there.

****August 17, 0745 hours, New York City, Earth****

"It's been over two weeks, sir," the young executive's handsome face was marred by concern. "We should have heard something from Tali by now."

"Do you think I don't know that, MacKenzie?" Spanner Misriah growled, his anger masking a genuine fear for his daughter's safety.

"I've been messaging her regularly but nothing comes backâ€¦, plus the reports coming out of Reach aren't good."

"Nicolo," Misriah cut off Natalia's would-be boyfriend, "status update on the Reach campaign."

A holographic image of a gentleman dressed for the Italian Renaissance appeared over the polished desk. "My lord, the main body of the UNSC fleet should be arriving within the day but it appears from reports coming from UNSC headquarters I've been able to see that a major Covenant armada has gotten there ahead of them."

"How large?"

"Estimates coming into the signals area from our sensors put it at over one hundred ships," the Smart AI reported.

"One hundred...", MacKenzie barely choked out.

"Over one hundred, young sir," Nicolo corrected.

"Get me Admiral Parangovsky, now," Spanner Misriah ordered.

Several minutes later the powerful industrialist was connected with the even more powerful head of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"What can I do for you, Spanner?" Margaret Parangovsky asked casually.

"Where's my daughter?" Misriah shot back without ceremony.

"And good morning to you too," she responded casually but with a noticeable edge to her voice.

"I want to know what's going on with Natalia's extraction from Reach. The situations worsening and I've heard nothing from her or you," he explained, ignoring the implied threat in the admiral's tone.

Parangovsky waved her hand subtly to mute the video terminal they were talking on while slowly picking up a file as if looking for information.

"Is sheâ€|," the admiral let the words hang from behind the folder.

"Still alive?" Black Box anticipated, materializing just off screen in its usual form of a black geometric box. "Give me a moment and I'll check."

Two seconds later the Smart AI was back to her. Yes, I can confirm that as of 1145 hours 16 August she is still alive."

"And your source is accurate?"

"Admiral?" Black Box feigned outrage. "Would I use any other? I simply looked in on Noble Team through their AI. Auntie Dot really should do a better job of closing her blinds," it added smugly.

Parangovsky took the communicator off mute.

"We're doing the best we can to extract your daughter, Mr. Misriah," Admiral Parangovsky lied evenly. It had been a low-priority mission since she'd made the promise over two weeks earlier but other opportunities for the shrewd leader had come up to slow down the extraction.

"Don't give me that crap. It's been sixteen bloody days Margaret, that's not good enough!" Spanner Misriah screamed causing those in the next office to his to look up in shock.

"You must understand sir the situation on Reach and in the area is quite fluid right now. While our fleet is en route so too is a major Covenant armada. Any type of extraction has become more," she paused, "complicated."

Misriah's faced turned purple. "I don't care about the situation I want my daughter off that rock right away."

"Or what?" the admiral replied coldly. "You'll go to the Council?"

She'd called his bluff. He had no ground to stand on, nothing to force her hand with.

"Please, Margaret, please," the powerful man begged. "Save my daughter."

"I said we'd get her off and I'm a woman of my word." She paused and allowed the positive words to sink in before she tightened her noose.

"Just remember your end of the bargain. In fact I've been thinking about it of late and I will be speaking to you soon about some things I'd like."

Totally defeated, Spanner Misriah, perhaps the most powerful civilian on Earth, could only croak out, "Whatever you want, Admiral."

"Good," Margaret Parangovsky smiled warmly, knowing she'd won another battle. "You can expect to hear from me within two days."

"So you're really going to do it?" Captain Serin Osman, the Admiral's executive assistant asked curiously.

"Of course," the admiral smiled afresh, sitting back comfortably in her high-back leather chair, "I did make a promise and I always keep my word," she answered, forgetting she'd made the same promise weeks earlier and hadn't fulfilled it. "Black Box, get me Captain Iglesias of the Dusk."

21. Chapter 21

****Chapter 21****

****August 17, 1025 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District****

The wind blew over the barren plain whipping up small clouds of snow from the ground. Despite the awesome sight of the crashed Covenant supercarrier filling the horizon nothing moved the trio who pulled up in the Warthog.

Private Shoemaker swore under his breath but loud enough for the other two to hear it.

Corporal Brown took a deep breath then sighed heavily, not looking at the ONI officer sitting beside him who'd dragged them out into the wilds and away from safety. "So, where is he?" he asked.

"I don't know," a stunned Natalia answered. She took the transponder Kat had given her and began to search but nothing came up.

"Anything?" the driver pressed, trying to sound calm.

"No, nothing," Natalia confessed.

"This is great." The soldier's eyes burned into her, finally crossing the breaking point. At first he'd thought it gallant to help the woman on this mission but as it progressed he had not only become more scared but also increasingly frustrated.

Shoemaker still hadn't said anything but it was clear from his body language he wasn't happy.

Turning away in disgust Brown grabbed the radio. "Foxtrot 5-5 to Fox Den," he called out. "This is Foxtrot 5-5, do you read, over."

Nothing but static came over the radio.

"Radio's down," Brown declared pointedly to Natalia.

Though aware of the reactions of the two soldiers she was in a state of shock. Her perfect plan had fallen apart. The image of her running to Mike and him responding was still fresh in her mind though it was starting to break apart like sun on a morning fog.

While Shoemaker swiveled back and forth warily on the Warthog's M41 Brown hopped out and began to look around. It didn't take him long to find the abandoned reentry pack that had been emitting the signal they'd followed.

"Well, this is it. Where's the Spartan?" the corporal asked anew with a note of accusation in his voice.

"Maybe burned up in the atmosphere?" Shoemaker called back, making Natalia shudder.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter, he's not here," the other replied.

"So what do we do now?" the private asked.

"We bug out and return to base before the Covvies get to us," Brown stated emphatically.

"No—we have to find him," Natalia declared quietly but without conviction. "He's—he's out there—I know it."

"Listen ma'am," the driver retorted without respect, "the op was to get this guy and bring him back. He's not here." Looking at the scanner he could see a few red blips on the outer edge of the IFF. "We got bad guys inbound and not a lot of fuel."

"But—but—I have to find him." Then the tough woman lost it. Natalia burst into tears and buried her head in her hands, totally defeated.

Corporal Brown walked away in disgust while Private Shoemaker jumped down from the back to put some distance between himself and the crying ONI officer. The angry soldier had thought a sight like this would have made him happy considering the number of times ONI had screwed them over but he wasn't. The plight of the helpless woman, despite her flamboyant red MJOLINIR armor, was unsettling. He walked away kicking some stones, then something caught his eye well away from the abandoned reentry pack. Josh Shoemaker had been a hunter as a child, taught tracking by his father. It was one of his fondest memories. He found a depression in the ground that looked like something heavy had landed, something shaped like a Spartan. Kneeling down he could see the impression of footprints going over to the abandoned pack.

"Shoe, saddle up! We're out of here," Brown called out to the gunner.

"Hold on corp," he called back. "I've found something." The soldier walked over to the reentry pack, examined it and then moved past, picking up more footprints.

"What's up?" the corporal called.

"I found something, Brownie," his partner called.

Natalia perked up at the declaration and moved towards where he stood followed by the other soldier.

"Look, the reentry packs been popped and the Magnum taken from it," Shoemaker pointed out. "Plus there's footprints, heavy ones, leading away from it in that direction," he pointed out.

Mike's alive! Natalia's mind lit up. "We're going after him," she ordered.

"Hold up there," Corporal Brown countered. "We have no fix on him and he's been moving for over a day. We can't do this, it's too dangerous."

"I don't think he's moving too fast," Shoemaker countered. "See this? He's dragging his leg which means he's injured so he can't have gone too far."

"Which also means he could have bled out over that next rise," Brown shot back. "There's no sig for him and we've got Tangos creeping up on us."

"Please, we need to find him," Natalia begged, all pretense of authority gone. She knew she was at the mercy of the two soldiers. "Please, I'm begging you."

"Can I have a word with you?" Brown grabbed Shoemaker by the shoulder and pulled him out of ear shot. "What the hell are you doing? We need to get out of here."

"It's not right, Brownie," Shoemaker declared doggedly. "Look at her. She's a mess. This is more than a recovery mission for her."

"She's ONI, who cares?" the unconvinced trooper spat back.

"He's a Spartan, he deserves better."

"So when did you start caring, Josh?" Brown lashed out. "You've been whining about this op ever since it started."

"Because it means something to me now," the younger soldier countered. "Listen, I can track him. We can move fast in the Hog. Let's do this. It's the right thing to do."

"You're crazy man," Brown shook his head, then turned away in exasperation. He looked up to the dark sky, as if seeking counsel from the divine before turning back. "Okay, let's do it." Looking to Natalia he called out, "All right, we're going to get your boy."

Natalia was so overjoyed she ran up and hugged the two of them spontaneously. "Sorry about that," she apologized in embarrassment.

Both soldiers beamed, suddenly aware that something good might be able to come from this whole degenerating situation. With renewed

conviction the trio pulled out and began to follow Mike's trail.

Noble Six had been walking off and on for hours. He'd holed up in a shallow cave for a few hours to get out of the elements and some rest during the night but didn't sleep. He did have some rations from his emergency pack but they were slim picking. He hadn't checked the time, he didn't care. His leg was killing him and his pace had slackened considerably the last three hours. He'd run through his stock of Biofoam so now was on his own even in terms of his medical condition. If that wasn't bad enough, there'd been several hostile pings on the IFF in his HUD so he knew he needed to keep moving. To top it off, his communications system still was down probably from the interference of coming through the planet's atmosphere. It would likely need a reset which wasn't going to happen in the barren plain he travelled on. Step by dogged step he carried on, clutching Jorge's dog tags. All in all it was shaping up to be a pretty lousy day.

_Come on Wolf, don't give up. You need to live. _Mike tried to keep pushing himself but then another voice entered in: _for what? Why do you NEED to live?_

He thought about that for a moment. Was this rhetorical? No, there was something there.

_You know why, _he stated to himself emphatically. Then the doubt crept in anew_. For her? You're delusional. Sure, she may be interested but it's never going to happen. Daddy wouldn't let it. You're nothing. A tool in his handsâ€|or a fool. Bottom line, we come from different worlds. It's stupid. Just give up man. Lie down and die. Better yet, put a 30mm round in your skull. No one's going to notice and no one's going to care. Reach is finished anyway. Jorge died for nothing. We're all finished._

Mike stopped walking and pulled the Magnum from the holster on his hip. He looked up into the slate grey sky knowing above the cloud cover hundreds of Covenant warships circled, ready to end it. What WAS the point? Why keep going? He was insignificant, a blip on the radar of life and eternity. No, he was worse- a genetically modified freak, alone in the cosmos, designed for one purpose-to kill. Besides, he was so tired, so very tired. Rest would be welcome.

Do itâ€|

He flipped the safety of the high-powered pistol off and his hand tensed.

NO!

A new voice inside his head screamed so loud it startled him. He would not give up that easily. If he was to die let his life be taken in battle facing his enemy but he was not going to surrender it. His life was a gift and he was no mere tool. He'd learned to feel again after years of not ever since his family had been killed and he wanted to feel again. He had a father, mother and sister who loved him and he'd loved before they were taken from him. He came from a rich heritage of service to mankind. The name Nantz meant something and just as his namesake in the 21st century had done he too would serve to the end. He sought no medals, fame or fortune. His was a

desire to serve, to do the right thing, to help those who couldn't help themselves. He was not a freak; he'd been given a gift: the ability to fight a vicious foe and cause them to fear.

Mike could feel himself breathing hard, his heart racing due to the internal struggle. Slowly he returned the pistol to its holster, feeling a slight shake in his hand.

All he needed was a sign, something to tell him he was on the right track. But until that came he was not going to give up, he was going to press on, fight and if he were to die, so be it, but it would count. With new resolve he took another step and then stopped.

A dozen green dots popped up on his HUD.

Friendlies.

He'd received his sign.

Getting a bit choked up at the realization, Mike held his position. Taking a seat on a rock to rest his aching leg he waited for the approaching group. The solitary Spartan actually sighed in relief to be joining up with others.

How quick things change, huh Wolf? He thought to himself as the UNSC troops were identified by his IFF as Kilo Company of the 7th battalion, a group unfamiliar to him.

He was surprised to see a trio of Orbital Drop Shock Troopers in olive drab UA/BDU armor come over the rise warily, their assault rifles tracking a wide arc. The lead scout hand signaled behind and the three moved past Mike though the first one gave a head nod in acknowledgement which the Spartan returned.

Following them nine ODSST Operators appeared led by a tall, lanky gunnery sergeant wearing a forge cap instead of helmet.

Stopping in front of Mike, the shock trooper NCO declared, "Well I'll be," in a thick southern drawl, "it really is a Spartan. Boy, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Long story," Mike responded removing his helmet wearily, realizing he hadn't slept in nearly 60 hours. "I'm just glad to see you guys."

"Well I'm glad we happened to come along this way or we would have missed you," the sergeant responded. Then he held out his hand and introduced himself. "Marcus Stacker, 7th Battalion, 105th Shock, but my friends call me Pete."

Mike took it and returned the shake, recognizing the famed ODSST division. They hadn't been on Reach prior to his arrival so if they were here things were worse than he knew. Then again, the arrival of the Covenant armada pretty much sealed that. "Mike B-312," he responded to the introduction. The he added, "Noble Team."

"Really?" the ODSST's head came up in recognition. "The B-312? The Lone Wolf?"

One and the same," Mike replied embarrassed by the enhanced

interest.

"If you're here I guess things are worse than we thought," Stacker responded.

"I thought the same thing when I heard who you guys were," Mike answered, "though I got here just before things kicked off. I thought I was here to fight Innies."

Stacker chuckled then became grim. "Bad luck for you."

Mike shrugged in resignation then changed topics to something more pertinent. "I need to get in touch with my team, let them know I'm alive."

Stacker gave Mike an odd look at the request but didn't ask for details. The sergeant knew the nature of special ops. "Regional comms are off-line. Covvies are jamming them. Local comms are good but that's not likely any help to you."

Mike sighed heavily still feeling alone despite being surrounded by the squad of ODST's. "Okay. So what brings you to the neighborhood?"

"Me and my team've been playing hide-and-seek with a group of hingehead zealots and their posse," Stacker answered. "It's weird. It's like they've been looking for something specific. Mind you, hasn't stopped them from hitting anything human that moves along the way."

"Yea, we found that too," Mike confirmed. "They've been digging all over the planet since they got here. Intel is they're looking for some sort of religious relics, that's why they haven't glassed the place."

"Well, they're slippery buggers," the sergeant confessed. "Couple times we thought we had them, and they slithered out. They even turned the tables on us once. We lost a couple guys. But now, with this new fleet, it's a new ball game." He paused as the gravity of his words sunk in. Shrugging his shoulders in resignation the ODST continued, "We saw that big-ass carrier come down yesterday so thought that might be a good place to hunt since the Zealots seemed to disappear afterwards."

Mike seemed to perk up at the mention.

Stacker suddenly got a hunch. "You don't happen to know anything about that do you?"

Mike didn't say anything but his face betrayed the truth.

The gunnery sergeant clapped him on the back. "You're welcome to tag along with us if you'd like. In fact I'd appreciate having you join up."

"Happy too, gunny. Thanks for the invite." Mike stood up and winced in pain.

"You okay son?" Stacker asked, noticing the obvious discomfort which was not the norm for stoic Spartans.

"Got busted up," Mike answered. "Legs got at least one fracture in it. Biofoam's wore off and I got no refills."

"We can help you with that," the ODST responded. "Muñoz," he called to one of his troopers. "Bring up Army and the rest of the group."

The rear party of the platoon moved up and along with them were three UNSC army soldiers and a female medic.

Mike looked quizzically at the NCO. "Their Pelican was shot down by ground fire two days ago. We pulled them out before the Covvies got to them. Medic's young but she knows her stuff. The others are okay. They know not to get in the way," Stacker answered. Seeing they were going to need to take a break, the sergeant called to one of his squad leaders. "Wentworth, we're going to take ten, set up a perimeter."

While the stocky African-American swung into action Stacker then got in touch with his scouting party. "Chin, we're taking a rest break to consolidate. Take your team a klick ahead and see what's up," he ordered over the radio.

"HUD's clear, gunny," Corporal Lu Chin reported back.

"I know that. I don't like it," Stacker responded, unmoved. "I want eyes on, not some read out."

"Roger that," the spry Asian scout confirmed.

"Hang tight Mike," Stacker said, turning back to the Spartan. "We'll get you sorted out and back in the fight in no time," he encouraged. Then the sergeant moved to check on his troops as the ODST's fanned out.

As Mike sat down again, he relaxed, happy to be among people once more. He watched the petite female Army medic with a caduceus medical symbol prominent on her helmet

trot over and remove her backpack with the Red Cross on its back. As that was going on the other three UNSC Army troopers with her followed casually behind and relaxed.

Mike could see that despite a grimy face, behind the dirt was an attractive young woman, likely a couple years younger than him. Her shoulder length chestnut brown hair was pulled back into a pony tail that became more prominent when she removed her helmet. Though only about five and a half feet tall and with delicate features she also seemed to have a toughness about her that made for an interesting contrast.

The medic took out a scanner and used it to take some readings but held back a bit, smiling shyly, her chocolate brown eyes avoiding contact.

"You okay?" Mike asked, uneasy by the reaction.

"I'm fine, sir," she responded stiffly, not looking up from the scanner.

The tone of voice and furrowed brow of the medic caused Mike a wave of panic, figuring his situation was worse than he'd thought.

"What's the matter? What's wrong with me?" he burst out.

Oh, no, it's not that," the private guessed what he was thinking. "You've got a fractured Tibia, some internal bleeding and several lacerations. Nothing I can't fix."

"Then what is it?" Mike pressed, standing up to his full height.

"I've never met a Spartan before, sir," she paused, overwhelmed by the 6 foot 9 inch supersoldier in full MJOLINIR armor.

"Killing automatons." Mike finished with little emotion.

"I'm sorry," she reached out spontaneously and grabbed his arm.

"It's okay," Mike answered, realizing the woman meant no offense but instead was intimidated by him as he towered over her. "It's all propaganda but it's to help give confidence that we can win this fight." Taking a risk, he held out his hand and introduced himself. "I'm Mike Nantz."

"Mandy," the woman replied happily taking it, "Mandy Campbell, sir."

"Forget the sir stuff, okay, it's just Mike."

"Okay." The striking medic smiled again which warmed Mike's heart for some reason. She opened her health kit and pulled out a hypo, measured an injection and popped it onto a port on Mike's armor to inject the medication.

An instant wave of relief coursed through Mike's body and he sighed in satisfaction allowing himself to relax for the first time in days. The medic observantly caught the reaction and smiled anew, pleased she could help. In turn, Mike saw her reaction and that made him happy he could bring some sort of pleasure to the person trying to help him.

He thought about Jorge and some of the advice the big Spartan II had given him, about living life for himself. He thought about Natalia and about making what they'd gone through together count. The image of Jorge standing in the landing bay of the corvette haunted him and a dark blanket of despair enveloped the Spartan.

Mandy had been watching the man, intrigued by the obviously lethal soldier. An insightful observer, she could instinctively tell there was something different about Mike Nantz. She'd been around soldiers before and despite the reputation of the Spartans this one she knew was not like the others, especially not the aggressive ODS's. She then saw his face change from content to pained despair.

"Are you okay?" the woman asked genuinely.

Mike wasn't sure how to answer. Then he caught too late a shimmer in the middle of the Army troopers standing idly around. A flashing energy sword materialized in the center of the one of the Army private's chest lifting him off the ground. A moment later a second trooper's head was lopped off by a slashing sword cut as two Special Ops Elites in dark red armor dropped their active camouflage and materialized in center of the group.

Before the ODST's could respond to the threat in their midst other Covenant forces lead by a group of Elite Zealots attacked the static squad.

Mandy screamed in terror at the sight as the third trooper tried to run but was cut down from behind by the first Sangheili. The second bounded over to the female medic, slashing down in a high arching thrust towards her head. The woman cowered in shock, held in place by fright.

Mike got there first.

Despite not wearing his helmet Mike charged in catching the arm of the Elite in mid-swing and turning it aside. The deadly blade _whooshed_ harmlessly past the woman as the Spartan grabbed hold of the Elite and used the warrior's momentum to cause it to fall to the ground. The Spartan was dragged down on top of the Elite who dropped its energy sword to the ground. They rolled around in the snow, each trying to get the advantage on the other. Mike deftly pulled out his combat knife and tried unsuccessfully to stab it. The Sangheili responded by head-butting Mike in the face with its helmet.

Mike saw stars and lost his grip. Despite the burst of pain he saw the other Elite moving in to kill the frozen medic. Releasing his hold he threw his knife at the advancing warrior. Though the blade clattered harmlessly off the Elite's shielding it did create a distraction. Mike kicked savagely at the one he'd been grappling with, catching it in the neck just below the helmet pushing off the one he'd been grappling with. Using the prone Sangheili for leverage, who reflexively grabbed its throat at the blow, Mike powered off it to charge into the other Spec Op.

The Elite made a wild swipe at him with its energy sword landing a glancing blow which cut deep into Mike's unprotected neck. Despite searing pain he didn't stop, grabbing the bigger Sangheili in a bear hug.

Mike knew he was outmatched, that he shouldn't be fighting this way, but the sight of the helpless medic, who had just been trying to help him made him angry. He allowed the anger to be fed by thoughts of Jorge, and his family. Adrenaline began to pump as did the synthetic drugs injected into him years ago to make him a Spartan all fueling his survival instinct. Anger turned to rage, the Lone Wolf let go and turned it towards this superior fighter. With a primal yell Mike picked the Sangheili off the ground and using the momentum he'd gained slammed it into a rock outcropping. The sheer force of the blow drained the Elite's shield as it dropped its weapon. In one motion Mike threw the warrior to the ground and jumped on top. Ripping the Sangheili's helmet off he began to beat mercilessly with his gauntleted fist into the mandibles of the now shrieking Elite. Blow up blow rained down on the Elite as Mike unleashed his fury. How

many he didn't know, he didn't care. He was letting it all out on this unfortunate. Heart racing, nose bleeding from the previous head butt and sweat pouring off him Mike stopped and looked down at the smashed in face of the dead warrior. He turned in time to see the now-recovered Spec Op Elite bearing down on him, energy sword raised in retaliation.

Out of position, Mike braced for the death blow but the air came alive with a stream of 7.62mm full metal jacket rounds from an assault rifle. The intensity of the burst turned the Elite aside. Pete Stacker charged in, reloading in one smooth motion with a fresh magazine and continuing the unrelenting rate of fire on the Elite warrior. Another ODSST joined the gunnery sergeant and together their combined fire overcame the Elite's enhanced armor dropping the dangerous fighter.

"Perimeter clear!" one ODSST called out.

"Roger that, Covvies are pulling back," another confirmed.

They'd survived the ambush.

Mandy came out of her shock at the unexpected attack and her gaze fell on Mike. She saw him stagger to get up, face bloody, and fall again onto his hands and knees. Immediately she was on her feet running to him. But instead of medical care she spontaneously embraced him almost knocking him over. Despite the bulk of his armor she turned him gently onto his back and held him steady, tears flowing down her face pressed against his.

"You saved my life," was all she could say between sobs before he blacked out.

22. Chapter 22

****Chapter 22****

****August 17, 1055 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District****

Mike was in a state of bliss. He was lying on his back on an overstuffed leather couch in a wood paneled library. Warm sunlight streamed through a large plate glass picture window heating the room to a toasty comfortable temperature. Best though his head rested in Natalia's lap and she attentively stroked his head. Light music played in the background. The taste of a fine red wine was fresh on his lips. It was a perfect day. He could lay there forever, the sweet sensation of Natalia's touch feeding him.

But strange dreams kept crowding into his mind.

Dreams of battle, suffering, invasion, killing and pain.

His pain.

He didn't want the dreams to crowd out the bliss of the moment; he wanted it to go on. Then another, sobering thought occurred. This wasn't real. Reality was crowding in on the dream. He couldn't stay in this pleasant place. He had to come back; he had to continue to give for a greater good.

Mike could feel the place slipping away from him. No, he wanted to stay, he didn't want to leave this thing he'd never experienced before with one who he knew to be unattainable, but he had to, duty called, honor demanded it.

Still, couldn't he stay a little longer?

It was fading, he was leaving the place. He tried to get up, to go somewhere else in the magnificent mansion but he was fixed in place.

"No!" Mike screamed and his eyes flew open.

He was no longer on a couch; he lay in the snow and rock on Eposz. No music played, only the wind whistled and the taste on his lips was blood, not wine. And Natalia wasn't there either.

It has been a dream, a tantalizing dream.

Or was it instead a nightmare? A cruel scene of what he'd never have, dangled before him by some unseen tormenter. Despair filled him as he remembered where he was and who he was.

Then Mike realized he wasn't alone. As his eyes focused he realized that Mandy Campbell was there beside him, cradling his head in her hands, looking down at him with sympathetic eyes. Like a thirsty man drinking from a fire hose he lost himself in her chocolate brown eyes.

"I thought we were going to lose," Mandy's voice cracked, tears welling up in her eyes then falling freely to cut a path through the dirt on her attractive face.

"Naw, he's a Spartan. Takes more to kill him than that," Gunnery Sergeant Stacker interrupted the moment which popped like a bubble. Confident Mike was okay he kicked one of the dead Spec Op Elites lying nearby in frustration. "They walked right into the middle of our perimeter! Killed those three boys like they were nothing. Damn! This is not going to happen again." The aggressive ODST stormed off to check on his squad leaving the Spartan and the female medic alone.

Mike's neck throbbed in pain and he couldn't breathe out of his nose. He tried to reach up to wipe it but Mandy stopped him.

"Don't," she declared firmly. "It's broken. I've reset it but it needs a bit of time to heal."

"My neckâ€¦," he began.

"You had a pretty deep gash on it but luckily it missed the jugular. If it hadn'tâ€¦" Mandy's voice trailed off, the words coming out strained, as the emotions crowded in again. She took a moment to compose herself before speaking. "I've got it patched up though. You'll be okay but they're likely be a scar." She looked away as if she'd failed. "Sorry."

Mike couldn't help but laugh. A scar? That was nothing. He was alive to fight again; it seems thanks to this unassuming medic.

Before she could stop him Mike sat up. He wobbled for a moment but the heavy MJOLINIR armor kept him in place. He rotated his neck a bit and scrunched up his face at the realization of the damage done to him and how he should feel as opposed to how he did.

"Wow, that's some good work," Mike commented in genuine admiration causing Mandy to beam with pride. "No way you learned those kinds of skills in the Med Corp."

"Well, I spent almost three years in med school on Earth," she confessed, again avoiding the Spartan's gaze in embarrassment.

"So what are you doing as a combat medic then?" Mike burst out in surprise. "You could have been a full doc or surgeon or something."

Mandy's face reddened, trying to meet Mike's steady gaze. "Things changed," she answered cryptically.

"Like what?" Mike asked in curiosity, no longer conscious of the pain from his broken nose or neck wound.

Mandy didn't respond but instead a look of pain marred her delicate face. Mike caught the expression and instantly felt a wave of guilt. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pressâ€¦.I justâ€¦.well...I mean, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I really appreciate what you did for me."

"You saved my life, how could I do any less?" the woman whispered, looking up at him. "If you would have died because of meâ€¦Iâ€¦I don't know what I would do."

"Well I didn't," Mike answered gently, more than he was used to. There was something about this female medic, like a delicate flower he didn't want to crush. He now found himself averting her consuming eyes. "I was just glad that I could help. I'm sorry about the men with you though."

"I didn't really know them," she answered frankly though seeming pleased with his concern for her. "I was attached to the group a week ago. I'd requested a transfer to a combat unit when Reach was attacked."

"You requested it?" Mike asked incredulously. "You mean you were somewhere else?"

"Yes, I was with the main hospital unit in the capital."

Mike snorted incredulously.

"I know it seems foolish," Mandy looked away again in embarrassment.

"I meant no disrespect," Mike jumped in knowing he'd gone too far. "It's just not usual for someone to want to be at the front during a battle when they're safe in the rear."

"Is there anywhere safe on Reach?" Mandy retorted forcefully.

"Good question," Mike confessed, startled by the strength of conviction. "Why though?" he asked, curiosity renewed and deciding to find the answer. "I mean you drop out of med school to join the Army then you request a transfer from the rear area to a combat unit after the Covenant invaded. You have to admit, that's bit unusual."

"Downwardly mobile?" the woman answered, a hint of a smile brightening her face.

Mike thought for a moment of Natalia and all the privileges she had, like being able to maneuver a posting to Noble Team and her was this woman purposely forgoing hers. Still, he couldn't help but chuckle at her response.

Mandy looked at him, as if assessing his real interest and intent. Then satisfied with what she saw she answered him. "It's not that, it's more personal." She measured her words carefully, as if portioning out her emotions to keep them under control. "My family was killed when the Covenant glassed Paris IV in '49. I wasn't there. I was away at school or I would be dead too," the young woman whispered haltingly, eyes welling up anew with tears. "I quit school and joined up the day after I found out. I just wanted to do my part, to make my life count for something, you know?" she looked up, tears now cutting a wider path through the dirt on her cheeks.

Mike nodded his head, drawn in by the young woman's sadness, feeling a bond growing. "That's a lot like my story."

"You too?" she perked up, as if finding a kindred spirit.

"Yea, just a lot longer ago."

"Is that why you," her voice trailed off.

"Became a Spartan?" Mike guessed. "Yes." He hadn't thought about it for a long time. "I was off planet of a school field trip when the Covenant attacked. It happened so fast." The stalwart Spartan paused to maintain a grip on his emotions at the imagery of the scene. Mandy placed her hand on his which he appreciated. Suddenly he wanted some sort of human connection. "At a memorial service that was held I was so mad. I wanted to do something to hit back to take away the pain. An officer named Ackerson approached me right after and told me there was a way to get in the fight right away."

"How old were you?" Mandy asked, drawn in by the tale.

"Nine."

"Nine?" Mandy gasped, increasing her grip on his hand and spontaneously grabbing the other.

"Did you know what you were going to go through to become a Spartan?" Mandy asked in a hushed tone.

"No, but I didn't care, I wanted to fight them right away. This was the only way," Mike declared.

"Do you ever regret it?" she asked honestly.

Mike looked at the woman and thought of all the things he'd missed out on. "Some parts, yea, but the world's changed so now I'm just trying to do my part to make sure some other kid doesn't have to go through what I did."

"That's amazing, thank you," Mandy responded in awe.

"For what?" Mike asked, confused.

"For making that sacrifice," she answered genuinely, also noticing how handsome the man behind the armor was. "For taking your tragedy and doing some positive with it." She squeezed his hands affectionately.

The two sat there silently for several minutes enjoying the presence of each other until Gunnery Sergeant Stacker came over and brought them back to reality.

"So, is our boy good to go?" the ODSIT drawled, not seeing or else ignoring the tender scene.

Mike answered instead. "Yes I am. Time to get back in the fight."

"Outstanding! See Corporal Henderson. He'll get you squared away with some weapons," Stacker encouraged.

Mike stood up and popped his helmet back on. Looming over the diminutive medic, Mandy shrunk back involuntarily as the intimidating Spartan cast a shadow that enveloped her. As he walked over to a group of ODSITs sorting out supplies the observant gunnery sergeant noticed the woman's reaction.

"Don't let the Wolf scare you! He's on our side," Stacker commented lightly.

"The Wolf?" Mandy asked back in confusion, emotions churning after the exchange she'd had with Mike.

"Mike B-312. He's also known as the Lone Wolf, or it's his nickname any way."

"How'd he get that?" Mandy asked in curiosity. Something about the Spartan interested her beyond the gratitude of his saving her life.

"Well, he fights alone," Stacker answered. "He has ever since his training. Been doing solo ops for years."

The thought of the man who'd shown compassion towards her and her situation being alone in this kind of environment for so long gripped the woman's heart. She wanted to get to know him better. Suddenly, her rash decision to volunteer for the front didn't seem so bad; it seemed as if the fates were pushing her there. "Do you know anything about him?" she asked expectantly.

"Naw, only by reputation. Never met him until today. But I do know the guys a killing machine that brings fear to the Covvies. He's

likely second only in kills to the Master Chief." Stacker boasted. Then finished with the gossip he got back to business. "Pack up your kit private and be ready to move. We're not staying here all day."

The medic was taken aback by the proud declaration of the ODST regarding Mike. Killing machine? That didn't seem like the man she'd met. Still, he was a Spartan and she'd seen him in action. Revulsion began to rise within one who'd dedicated her life to saving lives, not taking them. Yes, he was a killing machine, the thought, and had taken many lives it seemed. Her heart rate increased and her breath became shallower at the implication of the declaration. But then she reminded herself they were Covenant lives. And yes, she thought to herself, he'd also used those skills to save her life. It was all so confusing.

August 17, 1112 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District, Warthog Foxtrot 5-5, several kilometers behind Spartan B-312 and Kilo 4-0

"I'm picking something up on the scope. Looks like a group of friendlies," Corporal Brown reported. "Anything on your Spartan?"

Natalia's hands were turning white as she clutched the transponder. She had to will herself to let go. Praying fervently she punched in the numbers she'd been given. The screen on the device pulsed out several times as she held her breath and then a faint blip came up that grew stronger.

"I've got him! He's there," Natalia cried out.

"That's not all we got," the driver added, looking at the scope in the Warthog anew. "We got beaucoup Tangos coming up as well. Looks like we're right between the two groups."

"Nothing for it," Shoemaker called out from the back, swiveling he LAAG to the left in anticipation. "We've come this far. Sink or swim I say."

Natalia looked at Corporal Brown, holding her breath but said nothing. She knew it had to be his decision.

"Screw it. Let's finish this," the soldier declared grimly, punching the accelerator on the Warthog.

Several kilometers away the lead scout for the ODSTs picked up the same readings the trio approaching them had.

"Gunny, you might want to see this," Corporal Chin called out back at to position being held by the paused strike team.

"Wait one, I'll be right up," Stacker answered. Passing Mike along the way who'd picked up an assault rifle and was now loading it the sergeant added, "Wolf, come on along and see what we got. The rest of you stay put."

The pair trotted the four hundred meters up to the scout's position who was lying prone on top of a small rise.

"What you got Lu?" Stacker asked. Before the corporal could answer

the sergeant saw for himself.

Dozens of Covenant landing craft were touching down several kilometers away on the open plain to their front. Already grounds troops and vehicles were forming up to move out.

"My God," Stacker breathed out.

"That's not all, gunny," the scout added grimly. "We got a single Warthog coming in at 9 o'clock," he pointed to a faint dust trail heading in their direction. "They seem to be on an intercept course with us."

"Yea and the Covvies too," Mike interjected. "They'll be spotted any minute."

"What are we going to do?" the scout asked.

"Can't just leave them to it," Stacker declared in resignation. "Better bring the team up, Lu." Then flipping on his radio he called, "Kilo Dispatch this is Kilo Four-Zero, be advised, we have major Covenant troop landing on my grid. It looks like a new invasion force."

"Roger that," a voice on the other end confirmed. "Wait one for orders from the Actual, over."

"What have we got, gunny?" Corporal Henderson came up with the rest of the operators. He gave a low whistle as the situation before him became evident.

"Kilo Four-Zero, command has been made aware of the situation," the battalion communicator reported. "You are ordered to compress back to Rally Point Romeo and assist with defense of New Alexandria. How do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, dispatch." Stacker signed off, then turned to his command group who had assembled. "Okay, we're pulling back but first we got some friendlies heading our way. We'll cover them and then we're doing a fighting withdrawal."

Mike hadn't taken his eyes off the sobering scene before him. "What do you estimate the strength of that landing is?" he asked quietly.

"Division size at least with a full armor complement," Stacker responded grimly.

"And what do you think will happen when they get to New Alexandria?" the Spartan added.

"They'll steam roll the city's defenses like they're not there," the gunnery sergeant stated accurately.

"So what if they were delayed, or maybe never even got there?"

"That would change the situation for the defense, give 'em a chance to evac the civilians." Then Stacker caught the drift of where Mike's train of thought was heading. "Hey! I know where you're going with this." The aggressive ODST NCO chuckled. "Did I ever tell you how

much I like Spartans? So what do you think?"

Mike looked through the binoculars a bit before speaking, his mind developing a plan. "We need to get closer. Find some way to keep them from getting online. Disrupt them and maybe even send them on a wild goose chase. Give our people in New Alexandria a chance."

"I like it."

"What about the orders to fall back to RP Romeo?" Corporal Henderson cut in.

"We were told to help with the defense of the city and compress back. It just depends on the order you take it in. We'll fall back after we've helped with the defense," Stacker declared. "Agreed?"

"Feet first into hell," the African-American ODSI responded enthusiastically as his face lit up in a toothy grin. "Want me to bring up the rest of the squad?"

"Yea. We pick up the stragglers coming in and then we hunt," Stacker stated firmly. Turning to Mike he asked, "So what do you think, Wolf?"

Mike took one more look then turned to the sergeant. "Well, whoever's out there alone like that in this kind of situation needs a kick in the ass." Stacker chuckled. "We need to bring the Hog in first," the Spartan continued. "So a blocking team goes out and takes care of any patrols that get in the way, hunter-killer style. Small team, four men. I'll lead them. Hopefully it's small a target for a Covvie force that size to get interested in and they'll leave it be. Main body goes out and brings those jokers in. A fire base is set up here with the heavy weapons to anchor our line. Quick consolidation and then we move fast to the stores they're gathering and then we see what mischief we can into."

"I like it," Stacker confirmed. "Henderson will take out the recovery force and I'll lead the fire base with the medic. I'll also look after burying our dead. We strip the Hingeheads of their armor and leave 'em for the carrions."

"Sounds good. One last thing," Mike added, "my call sign is Noble Six, not Wolf. I'm part of a team." Despite the seeming futility of the situation and his conflicting emotions, despite Noble Team being nowhere close, he felt an identity with them as was already forming with the ODSI Kilo Team. He was a lone wolf no more.

As the Warthog sped closer to where they'd picked up the signal for the other UNSC troops, Mike included, the sight of Covenant ships dropping through the clouds in the distance provided an unwelcome distraction.

Too late, Private Shoemaker saw the pair of Skirmishers about to strike in ambush. Caught out of position to bring the LAAG to bear he screamed, "Brownie, on your left! Watch out!"

Corporal Brown reacted as fast as he could but was too late. The pair of avian looking scavengers sprung the trap the humans had floundered into. The first plasma round connected with the driver's arm causing a horrible burn.

But that was the last shot from the Covenant ambushers.

In rapid succession two high powered shots rang out across the plain and each of the Skirmishers heads jerked spasmodically as high-velocity rounds went clear through them from behind.

Involuntarily Brown hit the brakes in reaction to the unexpected action and pain he was feeling, the heavy Warthog coming to a jerking halt.

As if coming out of the rock four ODS'T's materialized and surrounded the vehicle. Startled by the unexpected visitors, Shoemaker almost opened fire in reaction. Two held position covering the vehicle while the others went to check past the vehicle. Two more appeared, checking the dead skirmishers.

"Clear!" the first one called.

"Confirmed," another responded. "Area secured."

As the ODS'T's fanned out an African-American corporal with a no-nonsense face approached the Warthog. "We don't have much time. You need to change your path to Seven-Four, Mark Five. You got two clicks and then you'll hit our firebase. Find Gunny Stacker and report in. We'll cover you."

That was all Corporal Brown needed to hear. In pain from his wound and unsettled by the near-fatal experience, he was ready to move on. Revving the engine he was about to pull out when Natalia stopped him.

"Just wait a minute, corporal," Natalia ordered, an edge to her voice. "We're on a recovery mission for a Spartan from Noble Team we believe might be in your company. Can you confirm this?"

Corporal Henderson sized up the woman in Spartan armor but wearing the tags of an ONI officer. Despite being in the field and the place crawling with Covenant something about anyone from ONI, especially one dressed like that, was unsettling. "That may be ma'am," he responded politely but carefully. "We're in an operational situation so we don't usually get into intel like that on the fly. If you can head out and see the gunny he can sort this out."

"I don't care what situation you're in soldier," Natalia snapped back, hopping out of the Warthog. Angry at being so close to Mike and yet having to play games, she demanded, "Where is he?"

"He's out with another team, ma'am," the ODS'T corporal grimaced at the woman who was delaying them though he tried to keep his tone even, wanting to get moving. They were sitting ducks here.

"Why?" Natalia rapped back, focused by now on finding Mike and forgetting the situation she was in, or those who were ultimately trying to protect her.

Henderson didn't like to be treated like that, even if the person was from ONI. He'd been a Helljumper for a long time and could read people pretty well. Something didn't add up with this officer.

Besides, he was tired. "Why is he out with another team?" he retorted sharply. "Because he's out blocking for idiots like you coming out here alone like this. Can we drop this and go?" Inside he winced, knowing that this was a chargeable offense, especially mouthing off to an ONI officer. Still, he didn't care. It actually felt good considering all the crap going down on Reach.

Instead of lashing out, or reprimanding him, Natalia's eyes began to tear up. "I'm sorry. You're right corporal," she agreed, voice shaky. "Forgive me for talking to you this way. Of course we'll follow your instruction. We can meet our man there." She climbed back in the vehicle, looking at the floor panel.

With that, a relieved Corporal Brown took it as a signal to go so put the Warthog in drive. The vehicle sped away to their new objective leaving a stunned Corporal Henderson behind shaking his head in wonder at what had just occurred.

"I'll be damned. What just happened there?" one of the operators who'd overhead everything asked in shock.

"Beats the heck out of me," Henderson answered, removing his helmet to scratch his head in wonderment.

23. Chapter 23

****Chapter 23****

****August 17, 1127 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District, Planet Reach****

Minutes later the Warthog made the crest of a small rise with a dug-in heavy machine gun position prominent. Looking closer, Natalia could also see an ODST with a Jackhammer rocker launcher ready to go. Moving beyond the crest and into a defile on the other side a tall gunnery sergeant wearing a forge cap and irritated look on his face held up a hand to show them where to stop.

As the Warthog ground to a halt the sound of small arm fire carried on the wind from a distance.

The ODST NCO raised an eyebrow at the sight of Natalia but his first words were spoken to Corporal Brown. "Son, you hurt bad?" he asked, seeing the dark burn wound on the driver's arm.

"Not too bad, gunny. Caught one on the way here," Brown reported through gritted teeth, and then he confessed. "But yea, it does hurt."

"Medic!" Stacker yelled to a group a few meters away.

Natalia noticed a female Med Corp private come trotting over with a health pack on her back. As the medic got closer to the Warthog she noticed the woman was quite attractive, in a wholesome way, despite the uniform and gear.

"So who are you and what are you doing out here, ma'am?" Stacker demanded assertively, getting Natalia's attention.

"I'm Lt. Commander Natalia Misriah, ONI Section 1. I've been attached to Noble Team. One of our members dropped in this area from an outer space insertion yesterday. We have reason to believe he's with you."

"Outer space insertion?" Stacker responded incredulously. "As in, he fell to the planet from outer space?"

Natalia nodded.

"The hell you say?" Stacker whistled. "And I thought we were crazy jumping in our drop pods." The expressive gunnery sergeant paused to consider the idea for a moment before getting back to business. "You mean Mike did that? Mike B-312?"

Natalia's heart raced and she practically jumped. "Yes, do you have him?"

"Yea, he's with us," the ODS'T confirmed. "He's out with a blocking force right now. We're about to attack the Covenant invasion force. He's leading the way."

Invasion force? Is he insane? Natalia thought. Her heart dropped and she was sure she'd turned pale. How could she be this close and let him die in a foolish mission with the Helljumpers? Sentiment got in the way of judgment for the still emotionally fragile woman. "No can do," she countered gruffly. "I'm to bring him in and we're to reunite with the team. I need you to call him in now."

Stacker's tone changed from relaxed to unfriendly. "Is that so?" he countered, solid chin jutting out. "Well right now we have an operational priority and we need him. If that Covvie force gets set it's going to smash this whole region. We need to slow them down and we need him to help us do it."

"I understand that sergeant," she countered, not really listening and getting Stacker's title wrong, "but he's not part of your chain of command so you don't have authority to make that kind of decision. Call him in, that's an order," Natalia declared officiously.

Stacker was angry now at the uppity ONI woman and opened his mouth to tell her what she could do with her order. Then his gaze fell onto the assault rifle he was now clutching in frustration and the name screamed out at him: _Misriah._

Crap.

ONI and the name Misriah. Involuntarily the experienced Marine looked over his shoulder, expecting a knife in the back. Even in the field, this far from Earth, a chill went up the ODS'Ts spine as the connection sunk in. Swearing to himself, Stacker straightened up and threw out a salute. Yes ma'am," he responded coldly. "I'll call him back right away."

Natalia realized she gone too far and overstepped her bounds. The hatred in the eyes of the ODS'T NCO reinforced that. But she had to get Mike out of this situation. She had to save him. Then the troubled woman noticed the female medic had perked up and was listening in on their conversation while tending to the wounded Corporal Brown who'd also overheard the conversation.

"Ma'am, if it's okay with you," Brown talked to Natalia, "me and Shoemaker'd like to head back to our base right away."

She opened her mouth to agree, intending to thank them for their help with the mission, knowing they'd gone above and beyond but Stacker cut her off. Even though he couldn't do anything about this uppity ONI officer he could with the Army soldiers. "Forget it son. It's all hands on deck and we could use your Hog's firepower. You're part of Kilo team now."

Out on the plain the Lone Wolf was on the hunt. With three ODSs in tow they moved in the shadows despite it being daylight finding rock outcrops and defiles to travel in unseen. Thankfully the inbound Warthog hadn't caused any interest among the massive landing. Why would it? It wasn't like the Covenant were hiding anymore. They were here to conquer and weren't afraid of a standup fight.

Still, there were patrols out guarding the perimeter and that was where Mike intended to start their operation. Seven Grunts waddled towards the position the team occupied warbling and snorting away in their guttural tone, blissfully unaware of what was near them only meters away. Walking right into the UNSC team's kill zone one of the ODSs raised his weapon, a 40mm grenade chambered, and prepared to fire. Mike silently put his hand on the barrel signaling the operator not to fire. The aggressive trooper looked angrily at the Spartan for blocking a clear shot.

"Not yet," Mike whispered.

"They'll get away," the trooper responded furiously through gritted teeth.

"No they won't," Noble Six countered, never taking his eyes off the patrol.

In less than a minute they'd passed through and moved beyond sight down into a swale on the undulating terrain.

"What are you doing man?" the ODS spat out angrily, though keeping his voice low.

"Yea, we could have capped 'em all. What's the problem?" another rumbled.

"Because killing them would have been easy. I have another plan that'll be more effective," Mike answered cryptically, plotting the Grunt patrol's route on his HUD. "Come on, let's move."

Taking off before the other now confused ODSs could respond the Spartan moved swiftly in the wake left by the Covenant patrol bringing the trailer into view a short time later.

The ODS right behind him raised his hands as if to say 'what's going on' so Mike signaled a halt.

"So?" the trooper asked, a bit exasperated.

"Okay. I'm only going to tell you this once." Mike stated firmly, turning to the ODSs but still keeping an eye on the patrol. "Killing

a bunch of Grunts does nothing. There's thousands down there. I want to get them thinking, get them scared of the shadows; slow them down."

"And how do we do that?" the belligerent Shock Trooper countered.

"I get it," one of his colleagues answered, figuring out the Lone Wolf's plan. "Hunter-killer, right?"

Mike nodded grimly in agreement. Pulling out his combat knife he motioned to two of the ODSTs. "We go fast on my signal. Cut the Methane hose on their backpack, then straight up under the circle in the center of their breathing mask. The rest of you are on overwatch," he ordered the remainder of the team.

Mike crouched low and moved quick and silent, surprising for someone wearing over a half-ton of MJOLNIR armor. But this was his domain, the way of the Lone Wolf. He'd done this type of op hundreds of times before, it now came automatically. The other two ODSTs mimicked his pattern, amazed at how the Spartan was able to move. The trio slid up swiftly onto the trailing three Grunts who kept waddling forward, unaware of their impending death.

The Lone Wolf signaled each operators target, he picking the one farthest away. Taking a deep breath he silently led with his knife point out and flat gliding towards the still unsuspecting prey. Mike counted to three with his fingers and then they sprang.

The Grunts didn't know what hit them. All three dropped to the ground within seconds, dead and then just like that the three humans melted back into the shadows like wraiths, slipping away.

It didn't take the Grunt patrol long to realize they were down three members. Doubling back they found their colleagues lying dead where they'd been slain. Screaming in panic the remaining Grunts threw their hands in the air and began to run about every which way, two of them actually bumping into each other while another fired off a spray of rounds in no particular direction from its plasma pistol.

Mike and the others watched hidden with grim satisfaction as the spooked Grunts sprinted pell-mell away from the macabre scene. Their patrol was over.

"That's how you sow fear," Mike declared without emotion.

"Awesome!" the once skeptical ODST confirmed enthusiastically. "That was brilliant."

"Yea, let's do it again," another chorused.

Mike thoroughly scanned his HUD for another target. It didn't take long. "Looks like we've got another likely candidate," he stated to his team.

"Noble Six, this is Kilo 4-0," Gunny Stacker interrupted over the team's comms, "return to firebase immediately. Packet is secure. We need to reassess."

"Say again, 4-0," Mike asked, confused by the request.

"We need you back ASAP, break actions and return," the NCO confirmed.

"Copy that," Mike confirmed, though with irritation. Reassess? Why would they need to do that?

"Damn," one of the ODSs muttered.

"Okay, you heard the gunny; we're heading in," Mike confirmed, then smiling grimly to the team, he added, "that doesn't mean we can't make a stop along the way."

Moving quickly the team found an advantageous spot where they could observe the next inbound Covenant patrol. This one was going to be trickier. Five Grunts travelled in loose file but there were also three Jackals wandering aimlessly off the track as if looking for treasure.

Again the humans let them pass, this time with no dissent from the ODSs.

"So how do we go after these guys?" one of the troopers asked in frustration. "They've got no pattern."

Mike watched them carrying on and noticed one of the Kig-Yar had strayed behind its colleagues. "Distraction," he answered. "You two, get ahead and to the right of the group about 30 degrees. On my signal, flash a light or reflect something. I want them to think there's something interesting out there. Then bug out back to our rally point. We'll take the rear party."

"Outstanding," the one designated to lead the pair agreed.

It took the humans nearly twenty minutes to work their way into position and they'd moved farther away from the firebase they were supposed to return to but they hadn't heard again from Stacker. Mike knew this score would be worth it.

Finally, the human team got them into a position that would work. Mike sent a green light 'go' signal into the team's HUD. A few seconds later he could see a flash of light, like the sun reflecting off of something. The two leading Jackals went bounding off towards it screeching to each other in delight without a thought to the rest of the patrol, eager to find out what was there. The Grunts behind them warbled in dismay and tried to keep up with the sprinting creatures.

The disarray gave the humans the opening they were looking for. Mike went for the Jackal.

As the Spartan prepared to strike the avian creature seemed to sense danger so turned quickly attempting to snap open its hand-held energy shield. Mike batted it aside and drove his knife through the creature's snout, causing it to squawk in pain. As the ODS quickly dispatched the two Grunts, Mike pulled his knife out while wrestling with the smaller Jackal. Grabbing onto its long snout and giving it a twist he exposed the creature's throat and ran the serrated edge of his knife along it. The razor sharp teeth bit through the tough skin of the Kig-Yar slicing its throat. Mike dropped down into a defensive posture but fortunately none of the patrol had looked back in their

haste to catch up with the distracted Jackals. In fact they were long gone.

"That was close," one of the ODS'Ts declared.

"Okay lets bug out back to the firebase," Mike ordered. Then he got a thought. "Hey, let's have some fun with this." They arranged the Jackal and two dead Grunts to look as if they'd been fighting with each other. Mike dropped a small field med kit in the pile and then his combat knife in the hand of the Jackal.

"Let them figure that one out," Mike declared in grim satisfaction as the others nodded in approval. "Come on," he gestured, "let's get out of here."

Melting back into the shadows the team began to head back to their fire base by a circuitous route, satisfied they'd started to work towards their objective. It took them about a half hour moving carefully and by the time they caught sight of the ODS'Ts on overwatch Mike's irritation at being called back prematurely had grown. The plan had been for the others to meet up with them, not for the lead team to fall back. He couldn't understand why a Helljumper like Stacker would want them to pull back. It wasn't their way. Cresting the rise and moving down the reverse slope he saw the Warthog which did nothing to help his disposition.

Then he saw the telltale red MJOLNIR armor. Natalia was there.

The irritation within the Spartan gave way to a fresh set of confused, raw emotions. What was she doing there? For at least half a day things had seemed uncomplicated and now he was back to gridlock. He wasn't sure what to do. Part of him wanted to turn back and head out into the field. He almost did

But then she saw him.

Her helmet off, she had been standing beside the gunnery sergeant talking with her back to him. By his expression he didn't seem too happy. Funny, she seemed to make that kind of first impression on people.

She turned and locked her penetrating emerald green eyes on him and he was caught like a fly in a trap. The expressive woman's face went from perturbed to delighted in an instant. A radiant smile lit up her face and despite their situation she ran to him as he stood dumbfounded.

"Mike, I'm so glad I found you," she gushed, giving him a quick embrace despite their bulky armor. "I was worried about you when you weren't at the drop."

"Tali, what are you doing here?" Mike responded in shock, unable to believe what he was seeing. "Is the rest of the team here?" he asked hopefully despite nothing coming up on his HUD. He couldn't figure out why he hadn't picked her up.

"No, just me and my escort," she confessed, pointing to the two Army troopers. "The rest of Noble Team was tasked to New Alexandria. Kat was able to figure out where you'd land after you jumped. I came to get you."

"By yourself?" Mike asked, stunned by the implications

"Yes," she answered quietly, aware others were starting to become interested in the conversation, especially the female Army medic. For some reason Natalia wanted to touch him so grabbed his hand and held on which he didn't stop.

"Thank you," Mike replied quietly, both comforted and unsettled by her arrival. Then a pained expression marred his ruddy face. "Jorge is gone."

"We figured that. We were following your op on the ground. We knewâ€¦we knew you jumped," Natalia responded, her voice betraying the emotion underneath the calm exterior.

"He threw me off the corvette," Mike's voice dropped to a whisper. "The detonator on the Slipspace drive was damaged when we took the ship. It had to be fired manually. He wouldn't let meâ€¦." his voice began to choke as the recollection began to overwhelm him. Despite the bulk of his armor his shoulders began to shake at the confession. "I wantedâ€¦I couldn'tâ€¦.I watched it go offâ€¦.", the words now came out in pained chunks as the tough Spartan fought to keep from crying.

Instinctively Mandy stepped forward and put her hand on Mike's back. She didn't think about it, she just acted eliciting a shocked reaction from the red armor clad ONI officer which quickly turned to unveiled anger. The sensitive woman didn't care. She couldn't stand to see the man's pain any longer as he confessed what had happened.

Natalia did a double take as the short, delicate woman touched Mike. At first she thought the medic was stepping in to steady him since she'd seen the bandage on his neck but then she caught the look in the woman's chestnut brown eyes and saw something else, something she didn't like. Natalia's competitive spirit flared.

Mike was ignorant of the whole affair, hurting anew for the sacrifice of his friend and seeming futility of his death. His resolve redoubled to get back out in the field and kill Covenant. He had to make this all worth the cost.

Natalia grabbed Mike's arm and began to pull him away but Mandy took a step to follow before the ONI officer fixed her with an icy gaze. "Pardon me, private," she stated officiously. "This matter concerns Noble Team," then pulled him out of ear shot.

Corporal Henderson was privy to the exchange and the observant ODSI caught the friction between the two women. "Something's going on here gunny," he stated to Stacker.

"You got that right son but I advise we stay out of it," he responded wisely. "Let the Wolf sort it out 'cause I don't want to get caught in the middle of that."

Natalia literally dragged a near catatonic Mike along with her out of view of the others behind the Warthog. The big assault vehicle created a bit of a screen for them to talk.

Mandy watched the pair go and wanted to follow but held her place not because of the ONI officer named Misriah's implied threat, she could care less about her name or role, she held her spot for Mike. Though they'd only met that day she was starting to feel an attraction for him that she'd never had before for any other man. The intelligent woman wasn't sure if it was the fact he'd saved her life or the enigma of a Spartan with a sensitive side. She wanted to know him better and get closer to him. But this other woman obviously had designs on him and she was there first.

So be it, Mandy thought to herself. _I won't stand in the way. But I'm patient. I can wait._

Something had snapped inside Mike. He wasn't sure what it was but the image of Jorge standing on the open hangar bay as he fell back to Reach had him in gridlock. It was one thing too many. The usually observant Spartan didn't even catch the tension between Mandy and Natalia. All he knew was he hurt, deep down inside, in the bowels of his soul. This is what it meant to feel, to care, and he didn't like it.

Forgetting the other woman, Natalia could see how much Mike was hurting. Compassion she'd never even knew existed rose from within. Her heart ached for Mike and she wanted to do something for him. Without thinking she spontaneously leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. The surprise and elation of the spontaneous act caused her to pull back like she'd received an electric shock expecting Mike to recoil as well. But the Spartan held his position, his look changing from pained to content.

"I'mâ€¦I'm sorry," Natalia stammered. "I'm not sure what got into me. I was just tryingâ€¦"

"Don't worry about it," Mike cut her off. "It was kind of nice."

The pair looked at each other and Natalia decided to throw caution to the wind. Closing her eyes she leaned in knowing Mike wouldn't move. Lips moist and parted she prepared to surrender herself.

"Sorry to interrupt your discussion ma'am," Gunnery Sergeant Stacker stated brusquely walking in on the scene. Looking at Mike he reported, "Covvies are beginning to move, Six. We need to swing into action."

The pairs bubble was burst by the ODS'T who severed their moment, reality coming crashing back in.

Elated by what had happened but afraid for what was coming, Natalia burst out, "We need to get out of here."

"What?" Mike answered back in shock, stunned by the kiss and the fact it had been about to happen again.

"We need to get away from here and get back to the team," she explained, putting her hand on his.

He pulled it away as if he'd been bitten. Emotions on a razor edge, the idea of abandoning the ODS'Ts was repulsive to him. Plus, he had too many conflicting emotions churning within. The kiss, Jorge's death, his feelings for Natalia, being back on the hunt, even

thoughts of the attractive medic all bashed into each other within him, causing turmoil upon turmoil. There was only one thing he was sure of that instant. "I'm not going anywhere," he stated emphatically.

"Mike, please," Natalia pleaded.

"No way," he retorted. "We need to do this."

"Come on, we have an assignment, with Noble Team," the calculating woman tried to reason with him, wanting to get away from all that was about to go down. "This isn't our fight."

"It's all our fight," he spat back. "We fight where there's a need and there's a need right here, right now." He looked her square in the eyes. "If you want to go, then go."

The implications stunned and hurt Natalia deeply. She'd come across the region to find him, fearing him dead, risking her life. Couldn't he see that? Couldn't he appreciate that? "But I came to bring you back?" she mutely answered, pain etched in her voice.

Mike caught the pain and realized he was the source. Guilt welled up but he didn't care. For her to even consider abandoning the ODSs made him angry overwhelming the small voice inside that was screaming at him to look at this another way. "Why?" he yelled at her, louder than he'd expected. "Why did you come for me?"

Natalia pulled back, caught off guard by the strength of emotion, suddenly intimidated by the hulking Spartan. "Because Iâ€¦Iâ€¦."

"Come on Six, we got to go!" Stacker yelled from just under the crest of the rise.

Mike walked away leaving the question hanging.

"Because I love you," Natalia confessed though she knew Mike couldn't hear her.

24. Chapter 24

****Chapter 24****

****August 17, 1127 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District, Planet Reach****

But Mike did hear her.

He almost stopped and went back.

Almost.

But the thrill of the hunt and urgency of the moment overrode his feelings. Plus, this was new and unfamiliar ground to him. It was easier to disengage and assess from a distance, like some target to study. Yes, he'd had feelings for Mel, maybe in a way he even loved her, but that had been years and a lifetime ago.

This was different.

There was still a war going on that demanded not only his attention but focus. They were moving out to disrupt the Covenant landing so this was not the time for sentimentality. Cresting the defile they were set up behind he joined with the ODST's who'd been part of his hunter-killer team earlier. They'd worked well together and so Gunnery Sergeant Stacker had kept them together. No point in messing with chemistry. Corporal Henderson would lead the other strike team and Stacker would operate from their fire base utilizing the Warthog for special opportunities. Two of his operators would crew the assault vehicle. Initially Corporal Brown had protested but only half-heartedly when he found out the nature of the mission. So he and Private Shoemaker stayed behind to provide security with the two remaining ODST's.

Natalia and Mandy were left behind as well. After her declaration Natalia turned away from a receding Mike to see the Army medic watching curiously from a distance. The competitive ONI officer glared at the woman than slammed her helmet onto her head to hide the churning emotions. She'd crossed the line not only by making her feelings public but even in the act of allowing them. She'd always kept men at arms-length, choosing to maintain control in her relationships but try as she could that hadn't been the case with Mike Nantz. Now not only had she crossed the line but she ran the risk of him not returning her affections. Was that possible? Could it happen? She couldn't believe it. Mike loved her, he had to. Then doubt began to creep in like the first chill of winter.

The tormented woman looked over at the perky little medic with a smug look on her face and wanted to shoot her.

Come on Tali, get a grip on yourself, she chided herself. She was not going to back down now. She'd made her declaration, it was true and deep. No, she wouldn't back down now no matter what.

Mike was happy for the ground he and his team were putting between him and Natalia.

_I love you_â€|.

The words had hit him like a bolt of lightning. She couldn't possibly, could she? He had to be mistaken, misheard. How could she love him? She was a gorgeous, rich, connected woman. He wasâ€|what? He was a Spartan. It couldn't possibly work. The equation kept coming up wrong. Still, there had been signs. Hints even. The woman had changed since he'd first met her on the Pelican down from the Grafton. He couldn't deny that or his growing feelings. Could it be possible?

The edge of the IFF indicator on Mike's HUD began to light up red like Christmas, there were so many contacts. Thus far he and the other strike team moving to the east of them had not generated any interest. Either the Covenant were not scanning or else less than ten human contacts were of no consequence to the several thousand alien warriors and their equipment disembarking.

Good, that was just the way Mike wanted it.

Their plan was simple. The two teams would get in as close as they

could and then see what kind of mischief they could get into then displace back to their rally point if they were still alive and take it from there.

If the Covenant were following their normal landing protocols, and he had no reason to believe they wouldn't, then there should be a number of fuel pods set up around the site to top up their vehicles before they set out. In addition, there should be at least one major ammo cache somewhere in the middle for the disembarking troops to load up on. If they could drop a jackhammer rocket launcher round into any of these then things might get interesting. That was the climax. For a lead up he wanted to get some Covenant weapons and see if he could encourage a little red-on-red fire.

That is, if it all worked out.

I love you.

The words hammered away at him, causing a distraction he didn't need right now.

Focus Mike. One thing at a time.

His strike team was moving closer to the splash of red signaling the epicenter of the enemy landing zone.

The two teams had a predetermined start time that they wouldn't commence operations before. Mike checked the mission clock and saw they still had about thirty minutes before they entered the time to go loud. His team had made good progress and been unimpeded so he had the time to wait a bit for something to develop. That was as far as the plan had gone; the rest was going to be pure improv.

In truth though this was exactly what Mike thrived on and in this moment needed to take Natalia's statement from his mind, this was the domain of the Lone Wolf. Better yet, he had three battle-hardened ODS'T's backing him up. This might even turn out to be fun. The veteran Spartan watched the outer reaches of the landing zone carefully, assessing and reassessing. He'd already spotted a fuel bunker that interested him but that was for the finale.

First the super soldier wanted to shake things up a bit. An Elite flew around in a Ghost. That was of no interest. A squad of Grunts waddled out onto a patrol, again, that wasn't it.

Then he saw what he wanted.

A trio of Jackals slipping away as if looking for plunder. The way they moved from cover to cover meant they were trying to leave whatever chain of command they were under without being detected, meaning they weren't on anyone's grid. That was exactly what he sought.

Signaling his colleagues, the strike team followed the avian creatures away from the Covenant strongpoint. Squawking back and forth excitedly the scavengers were unaware of the shadows that had tucked in behind them. Moving into a blind spot of a rocky defile the three Jackals dropped from view.

Despite the fact there was still ten minutes before operations were

to commence Mike wanted it done before their invaders knew anyone was around. Besides, he was certain they could do it silently. So with an isolated kill zone the humans sprang. Using combat knives the Spartan and ODSs quickly moved in and slit the throats of the Kig-Yar. One was able to evade the knife attack but Mike responded immediately, grabbing the bird-like creature by the neck and wrenching it hard until he heard a satisfying crack. He dropped the limp form onto the dirty track and then picked up its Needle Rifle. The other two had carried Needlers. The ODSs could swear the Lone Wolf was smiling behind his visor at the discovery.

Mike checked the mission clock and there were still several minutes. Perfect. He motioned the others to join him since he wanted no radio communications that could be intercepted. Moving aggressively deeper into the landing grid they were able to travel beyond the outer reaches since none of the Covenant seemed to be especially vigilant due to the size of the operation.

It was time.

Mike pointed out a group of Grunts milling around for the two ODSs who had Covenant weapons while the third stayed on overwatch. The Lone Wolf then turned and squeezed off a long burst of purplish-pink crystalline shards from the Needle Rifle at a pair of Elites who had their backs to him. He knew he wouldn't be able to kill them with their shields up but that wasn't the point.

All three fired at about the same time. One of the Grunt's methane tanks exploded from a Needler round and another took three of the shards in the chest bursting it open. Caught off guard, the rest of the group yelled in panic and ran in all directions.

As Mike had anticipated, in their alarm three accidentally squeezed off rounds from their plasma pistols, one hitting an Elite that had been surprised by the Needle Rifle attack. With a roar of outrage one of them shot back with his Plasma Rifle killing two Grunts while the other activated his Plasma Sword.

As this was going on a group of curious Skirmishers came into the area from the general proximity of where the undetected humans had come from initially. By this point Mike and the ODSs had already moved to their fallback location so the Kig-Yar with pronounced manes became the likely culprit of an inter-racial attack.

Screaming obscenities in its native tongue the Sangheili warrior charged at the Skirmishers with its Energy Sword. Cutting down the first two Kig-Yar with a practiced back-and-forth stroke the other three in the party didn't wait to be slain. Instead they fell back and opened fire on the screaming Elite. Two had Beam Rifles and at that range their concentrated energy bolts cut through the Sangheili's armor slaying it.

From there pandemonium broke out just as a series of small scale explosions from the other side of the landing zone erupted expanding throughout the area. Reacting to the confusion, two Wraith tanks accidentally drove over a squad of Grunts while a pair of Ghosts crashed into each other.

With a satisfied look Mike took it all in. This was turning out better than he'd hoped. Knowing though they shouldn't push their luck

he knew it was time for the next phase and then to fall back. Tapping the shoulder of the ODS'T who carried their rocket launcher the operator unslung it then sighted the scope quickly onto the large fuel pod in the distance. The M19's smart-linked sight locked onto the target and then he squeezed the trigger. The jackhammer belched then in trail of flame the 102mm HESC round took the millisecond it needed to squarely hit the target. The fuel carrier erupted in an orange ball of flame but best of all unerrupted fuel spilled all over the surrounding area then ignited. Fortunately for the humans five Wraiths were lined up to be fueled. The fireball enveloped the first in line igniting its ammo store setting off a new explosion that sprayed molten plasma all around. The scene was pandemonium in the landing zone as Mike and the ODS'Ts slipped away unseen.

But they weren't.

An Elite Zealot spotted the humans slinking away from the scene of carnage and the wise Sangheili warrior was able figure out how this seemingly spontaneous act had occurred. As Field Masters tried to regain control the Zealot gathered several of his clansman to follow him as he moved out bent on revenge while another trio fired up a Wraith to provide fire support.

Moving away from the scene of carnage the humans were in good spirits. Though they practiced good movement and noise discipline for the first kilometer-and-a-half of their return to their firebase the continued sounds of explosions and sporadic Covenant small arms fire caused their spirits to soar. Though they didn't know how the other strike team had fared theirs had turned out better than they'd expected.

Looking back as another fireball shot up in the air the trailing operator couldn't help but exclaim, "Now that's how it's done!"

"Yea, feet first into hell, hoo-ah!" another chorused, pounding the third one on the back.

Their pace slackened as the three young Marines began to share their recollections.

"See that fuel bunker go up? Boom!"

"Yea, what about that pack of screaming Grunts that opened fire on the Jackals and then got dusted by the pissed Kig-Yar?"

"That was awesome."

Around and around the recollections went until Mike finally had to step in. "Pipe down! Save it for when we get back. We're not clear yet so stay sharp."

"Come on sir," one of the ODS'Ts countered, "they're going to be chasing their tails and putting out fires until the morning."

Too late Mike saw the shimmer of light. "Watch out!" he yelled to the young operator.

Just as he'd watched the UNSC Army trooper get skewered by the Energy Sword wielding Elite again Mike watched in horror as the laughing

ODST was run through and lifted off the ground as the first Elite Zealot materialized to attack.

Plasma fire erupted as the other Elites appeared and attacked the surprised humans.

"Contacts!"

"They're all around us!" another of the ODSTs screamed.

Mike shoulder blocked one of the burnished-armor clad Elites who'd come in too close. His momentum knocked the taller Sangheili over and then following up the Spartan smashed his heavy boot into the gaping mandibles, stunning the creature whose shields hadn't fully regenerated yet. Raising his assault rifle he opened up with a ten round burst that shredded the creatures face.

"Fall back! Defensive formation!" the Spartan called out.

But it was too late.

At least ten Elites were swarming in and around them and it had become a free for all. If the humans had been Spartans in MJOLNIR they might have stood a chance but the ODSTs were lightly armored and caught off guard. Still, the remaining two operators fought like wildcats. Bobbing and weaving they moved in and out of the howling Elites taking several down with bursts from their MA5B's.

Just when Mike thought they might be able to extricate themselves the distinctive rumbling sound of Covenant armor drowned out the sounds of individual combat. As the Wraith appeared over the crest of a rise only a hundred meters away another of the ODSTs went down, cut in the shoulder and mid-section by an Energy Sword. The third Marine held his ground, protecting his fallen brother as Mike desperately tried to fight his way over to them but a wall of Sangheili prevented him.

Mike thought for a moment about Natalia and how he'd never get the chance to consider the words she'd said to him only a few hours earlier. It seemed like another lifetime. But if he were to die it would be beside the ODSTs. It would be a good death, a soldier's death.

Then a new sound filled the air: the ear-splitting staccato of an M41LAAG. Engine roaring a Warthog bounced over the opposite rise and charged into the fray. Gunnery Sergeant Stacker swiveled back and forth laying down a deadly stream of armor-piercing rounds from the high-powered anti-aircraft gun. Cutting down three of the Elites blocking Mike the ODST NCO then turned his focus on the Wraith that was desperately trying to maneuver into position for a shot. First he drilled the vehicle commander then waving his driver into an advantageous flanking position against the lumbering tank he unloaded several hundred rounds into the lightly protected rear. The Wraith began to smoke then exploded, grinding to a halt.

Mike took advantage of the confusion to drop half a clip into the nearest Elite who'd paused to watch the surprising spectacle.

Swiveling backwards as the Warthog made a wide turn Stacker chewed up

the earth until he found two more Elites and shredded them while the remaining ODS'T pumped a 40mm grenade into another.

And then, just like that, all the Elites were on the rocky terrain dead.

The Warthog ground to a halt near the strike team causing a spray of dirt and small stones to fly.

"That was fun," Stacker deadpanned until he saw that two of his operators were not getting up. "Get 'em in the Hog," he yelled.

Mike and the unharmed ODS'T helped the more lightly wounded Private Perez into the vehicle and then carried the unconscious Private Weise, carefully laying him on the floor boards, and then the pair hopped on the back.

"Punch it!" Stacker ordered the driver who hit the accelerator causing the heavy vehicle to lurch forward before gaining speed.

Back at the firebase the two remaining ODS'Ts left lay beside the embedded Heavy Machine Gun surveying the terrain with binoculars, sticking to themselves. Even at this distance the sound of explosions echoed satisfyingly over the plain. The two UNSC Army troopers nervously walked a perimeter, clenching their assault rifles. Neither wanted to be in this situation or this exposed.

That left Natalia and Mandy alone with the pile of gear the others who were out on mission had left behind at the collection point. Initially the two women had avoided contact, trying to fill the void. Mandy reorganized her med kit while Natalia tried to reach Noble Team on the comms. Eventually they ran out of idle things to do. When the sound of distant explosions could be heard on the light breeze neither could stay silent.

"What do you think's happening?" Mandy asked.

"I think our guys are getting the job done," Natalia responded emphatically.

"There's an awful lot of Covenant out there," the medic continued with concern.

"Mike can handle himself," the fiery woman retorted.

"I know that," Mandy shot back, irritated by the taller woman's tone. "I've seen him in action. It doesn't mean that I'm not concerned about him and the others."

"Oh, you think I'm not?"

"I didn't say that."

"So then what are you saying?" Natalia stood to look down at the smaller woman.

The sound of a straining engine interrupted their exchange.

"Warthog inbound," the ODS'T on overwatch called out, "looks like

they've got wounded," he reported

Without saying a word Mandy moved to her med kit and prepared to receive the Warthog that flew over the berm they were set up behind, skidding to a halt.

"We got two down Doc," Gunny Stacker called out.

The driver was out of the Warthog in a flash, helping the one wounded ODS'T out of the back while Mike and Stacker gently lifted the other out and laid him on the ground. Within seconds Mandy assessed the conscious one and gave him a shot of Biofoam to stabilize his condition. In less than thirty seconds she was efficiently examining the more badly wounded Private Weise.

"How was he wounded?" Mandy asked efficiently, seeking to understand the nature of the wound.

"Energy Sword," Mike replied quietly. "We got jumped by some Elites with active ammo. Theyâ€|"

"That's all I need to know right now," the medic cut him off tersely as she began to unfasten the armor from the gray-faced ODS'T.

Natalia bristled at the brusque response. It was obvious Mike was upset about what happened but she held tongue since the petite medic was now in charge.

Mandy first looked at the wounded man's heart rate and breathing then went to work.

"Can you save him, Doc?" Perez asked, despite the pain of his own wounds.

"I'll do the best I can," Mandy responded kindly though not taking her eyes off the unconscious Weise. "The sword fused the wound which is good but a lot depends on what vital organs got hit."

"All right, give the lady some space to work," Stacker demanded brusquely, pushing the others back.

Mike walked away in frustration kicking a stone so hard it sailed through the air like a football soaring for a field goal.

Stacker followed him. "Kilo 4-4 this is Kilo 4-0, return to firebase immediately, over, cease operations," he ordered the other strike team still out on the plain.

"Roger that, 4-4 inbound," Corporal Henderson acknowledged over the radio.

"It looks like we're going to be here for a while," Stacker said to Mike while looking at Mandy working on the badly wounded ODS'T. "We need to get this place ready for attack, in case the Covvies figure out where we are." The sound of explosions could still be heard drifting on the wind. "Though it looks like you guys did a pretty good job distracting them."

Mike didn't respond or look at the NCO. Instead he jerked his helmet off and slammed it into the side of leg in frustration.

"What's the matter with you son?" Stacker observed, already guessing what the problem was.

"Shouldn't of happened. We got sloppy," Mike responded, looking over at Mandy working on the injured ODS, anger at himself welling up.

"What do you mean?"

"The attack went good, better than I'd hoped for," Mike reported. "But we got sloppy on the way back, let down our guard. A bunch of Elites jumped us. Didn't see them on the IFF but I should have known better."

"They were Elites with Active Cammo, though, right?" the veteran ODS asked.

"Yea, but it doesn't matter," Mike shot back, frustration growing.

"You been around long enough son to know you can't control everything in the field in real time," Stacker responded.

"I should have known better," Mike doggedly replied.

"You don't have a lot of experience leading troops do you?" Stacker asked, changing tactics.

"How did you know?" Mike asked, caught off guard.

"Lone Wolf," the seasoned NCO responded.

"Oh." Mike wasn't sure how to respond.

"Tough, huh?" the gunnery sergeant asked knowingly.

"It sucks."

"It can at times," Stacker admitted. "But you know what? It's the best job in the world. It's also the toughest but still the best. You have the opportunity to lead highly trained and motivated warriors into battle for a cause greater than self. Can you think of anything more marvelous?" The wise NCO now had Mike's complete attention.

"You know," Stacker continued, wanting to help release the guilt of the tormented Spartan, "hundreds of years ago a general said that in order to be a good leader you had to love your men but you had to be willing to sacrifice the ones you love. There's an ancient book of humanity that has guided people for centuries that said greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends."

Mike couldn't respond. He didn't know what to say, but the look on his face betrayed the reality of his feelings.

Stacker gave the Spartan a fatherly pat on the shoulder though he wasn't much older. "You do care and you would gladly trade places with Weise right now, I believe. It's obvious, that's why the boys

have responded to you so well. But they're also ODSs. They knew the risk when they signed up. You can't bring them all home."

"Does it ever get easier?" Mike asked hopefully.

"No." Stacker's voice suddenly dropped and took on a husky tone. "You weep for every damn one of them and then you send the next batch in."

Mike nodded his head in agreement, finally understanding what it meant to fight as part of a family of brothers and sisters. He'd kept Noble Team at arms-length, but he'd instinctively known that wasn't the way to be and it especially wasn't the way he'd wanted to be. He cursed Colonel Ackerson anew for yet another thing the pragmatic officer had stolen from him.

Mandy walked over and the two men's conversation stopped. "Private Weise is going to be okay," she reported happily.

Mike was so overjoyed he grabbed the medic and spontaneously hugged her, almost breaking the petite woman's ribs.

"Way to go, Doc," Stacker congratulated the woman.

"Yea, thank you so much," Mike added, moving out of the embrace.

Rather than letting him go Mandy boldly held onto his hand which he didn't resist as Natalia's eyes bulged at the sight from a distance. "Luckily no major organs were hit and you got him here quickly," the medic reported. "I just did the best I could from there."

"Seems like it was pretty good to me," Mike gushed admiringly.

"Yes, good job, private," Natalia interjected, moving in and casually breaking the clench between the two. "So how soon can we move out?" she asked pointedly.

Mandy gave her a dirty look but stayed professional. "He can't be transported for at least six hours. I'd say we're here for the night. In the morning we can see."

"Mike," Natalia began.

He waved her off, not wanting to know what she'd say. "Okay then. Gunny, we need to secure this perimeter. Once Henderson and his strike team are in we hunker down for the night and hold this position."

Stacker nodded in agreement. "All right, get that Hog in a spot to cover our front. That'll be our strongpoint and'll support our cas-evac station," he began as he noted Natalia walking away in a huff. "The rest of you, get into your positions. We're here for the night."

The other strike team came in an hour later. Though they had no casualties they'd also not had the success of Mike's team. They were able to report a general state of pandemonium in the Covenant landing area. It seems as if they'd bought New Alexandria some time.

With the defensive position established and night falling watches were set and those not on duty could enjoy some down time. As Mandy tended to the two wounded ODSs Mike sat off on his own, still brooding over what had happened over the course of the day. Natalia tried several times to engage him in conversation but the Spartan wanted to be left alone.

None of this was lost on Gunnery Sergeant Stacker.

"Yo, Doc, can I have a word?" Stacker asked casually but his eyes betrayed concern.

The medic checked Private Weise and satisfied he was okay walked over to where the NCO squatted down over an MRE. "What's up?" she asked.

"I don't know what's going on with you and Noble Six but you've definitely gotten on someone's radar," the gunnery sergeant reported in a low voice, gesturing towards Natalia who followed Mike as he got up and paced around the base camp.

"So?" Mandy shot back, unconcerned.

"Listen, I like you. You've done right by my squad and saved some of my boys. It's not my business but you need to realize who that lady is Doc. She's ONI and named Misriah."

"So?" the naïve woman said again, still not getting it.

"So look at my rifle and see what name is printed on it," he pointed out.

"Misriah," Mandy read.

"Yea, as in, 'my daddy owns that company and probably about a third of Earth' Misriah."

Mandy finally connected the dots.

Knowing he had the young woman's attention he said simply, "Listen, ONI can make people disappear, even on a place like Reach and so can a name like Misriah. So tread lightly."

"Thanks gunny," Mandy responded, though her stomach felt as if she'd gone off the first drop on a massive rollercoaster.

Stacker went back to his meal and Mandy walked away, her mind swirling.

25. Chapter 25

****Chapter 25****

****August 17, 2043 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District, Planet Reach****

It had been dark for several hours and the human camp settled in for the night. Those on guard duty could see the plain before them with thermal and infrared imaging so their perimeter was secure. But at

this point few worried about attack from the Covenant. Though the new invasion fleet was several kilometers away the glow of burning fires from the attack earlier in the day still glowed on the horizon.

As it got later the temperature began to drop. With it the wind picked up causing a further chill in the air. For Mike and Natalia in MJOLINIR armor that caused no issue, they were in a fully climate-controlled environment. Even the ODSTs were protected by the BDU battle armor they wore. The UNSC Army troopers and Mandy were not as fortunate and they felt the bite of the snow-laced wind.

Sitting down with her back against the bumper of the Warthog Natalia chided herself for acting like a jealous school girl the previous two days. She'd worked so hard to learn and to grow and now she felt like she was blowing it. Why? Because some other woman was interested in Mike? She was so why would it be a surprise someone else would find him attractive? Maybe because she felt as if she didn't measure up and would lose him in the end, something she wasn't used to experiencing. She was a Misriah; she was Stinger, a champion.

Yet none of her advantages seemed to matter here on Reach. The troubled woman considered anew what her father must have gone through to acquire the armor she wore as Mike silently field stripped his assault rifle to clean it. Correction, the Spartan armor she wore. Mike, as had all who wore the coveted and expensive ensemble had been physically augmented to operate the half-ton fighting system. Not her. Instead of the soldier being augmented the suit had been adapted for God-knows how much money so she could operate it.

And she wasn't even a real soldier, Natalia sighed.

Only the best for Spanner Misriah's little girl she thought to herself with a tone of bitterness. Now that she'd been around real soldiers for a while she began to understand the dirty looks and off-hand comments that had been thrown her way when people saw her in the red armor. Even the color screamed privilege. She stuck out like a beacon on the barren plain of Eposz. It was certainly a different world than what she was used to at ONI headquarters on Earth.

But she was a real soldier. The past was in the past, it was the present that mattered and what she did with it. She'd fought to the best of her ability, she'd learned, she'd grown and she'd contributed in a modest way. Best of all she'd been accepted by Mike and the others of Noble Team. That meant more to her than anything else she'd ever accomplished. Despite the threat of death she didn't care, right now, she'd rather not be anywhere else in the universe. Her life was making a difference and she was with a man she truly loved. She was alive; this is what it meant to live. A smile lit up her attractive face.

Then Natalia's mind focused anew onto the perky little medic who was carefully tending the wounded ODST at the other end of the Warthog and that caused a frown to suppress the smile.

Mandy was oblivious to the turmoil she had caused coming from only a few meters away. She tried to ward off the night chill but the wounded Private Weise wasn't so fortunate. His armor system had been ruptured plus the trauma of his wound made the ODST shocky. He'd been wrapped in several metallic Mylar blankets plus a small emergency shelter had been pitched to house him, but still, his temperature had

been dropping in synch with that going on outside.

Mandy had mounted a constant vigil over the wounded Marine and rebuffed any overture for her to be relieved at the moment. The medic wanted to monitor the vital signs of the operator closely herself, trusting no one else with the delicate instruments.

That wasn't her only reason for separating herself from the rest of the group. The short conversation she'd had with Gunny Stacker was heavy on her mind. The NCO had warned her off of a relationship with the Spartan Noble 6. But he wasn't merely that. He was more than his designation or role, he was Mike. Her feelings were already conflicted before the Marine had kindly given his warning. She did have feelings for him but what were they? She couldn't tell. Now new feelings were rising, stubborn belligerence. Who was he to warn her off? More importantly, who was this Misriah character to interfere in her happiness? It was obvious the tall ONI officer didn't like her but was it because she saw her as a threat? Mandy wasn't certain.

The thoughtful medic also wasn't certain she wasn't a threat. The conflicting thoughts and emotions bounced around inside of her and yet they were not unpleasant. In fact, after the trauma of the death of her family and misery of what she'd seen, these new sensations were rather welcome. It felt good to feel like a woman again. Back in the days she had been pursuing education and med school she would have dismissed them as silly emotions, not worthy of reflection but now she'd seen much, too much. Silly suddenly was a welcome respite. Besides, she could be dead the next day or the day after that. Why not feel something again, something like love, she paused for a moment to ensure the silent admission was correct. Like love. It was correct and she thought she might just be feeling it.

Double checking Weise and then Private Perez, the woman knew she needed some sleep. Burrowing into two Mylar blankets under the rear bumper of the Warthog slumber came quickly. Despite the cold she was warm from the flush of emotions she was feeling.

Morning had not yet dawned. In the chill of the early hour Mike and Stacker huddled together planning the next phase of their operations against the large Covenant force. During the night Mike had scouted the perimeter of the landing zone to assess the results of their activities. While they'd put a dent in them the invaders were far from stopped. Returning, the creative Spartan had a few ideas to rectify the situation. As the two leaders talked Mandy approached the command group. Her usually happy face was marred with a grim look of concern that Mike knew as he watched her approach wasn't good.

"Excuse me," the medic cut in, "Can I interrupt?"

"Sure Doc, what's up?" Stacker asked.

"I have good news and bad news."

"Okay, shoot," the ODST NCO answered evenly.

"Perez is good. It's Private Weise I want to talk about. Well, his wound is healing fine and his condition is stable," she began.

"But," Stacker interrupted.

"But," the woman avoided eye contact, "his vitals are dropping. I almost missed it because it's real slight but it is happening at a steady rate."

"I thought you said nothing major got hit?" Stacker shot back in concern.

Mandy recoiled, obviously embarrassed and uncomfortable with the situation.

Mike jumped in. "Well I'm glad you caught it. What do you think's happening?"

Mandy's heart soared as Mike stepped in to defend her. "The problem is I don't have the proper instruments to do an assessment," she explained. "I suspect a vital organ may have gotten nicked by the sword when he was stabbed. Regardless, his condition is deteriorating. He needs to get to a major medical facility."

"So you're telling me he's bleeding out?" Stacker confirmed.

"Yes gunny, that's essentially what's happening," Mandy answered unhappily. "He needs an evac or we may lose him."

"Where?"

"New Alexandria is likely the closest."

"Okay. He'd likely be dead by now if you weren't with us. So thanks for what you're doing," Stacker stated kindly to Mandy's relief. "Henderson," he barked, "I need the radio now."

The African-American corporal brought the set over and Stacker toggled the switch for regional comms. "Kilo Lead this is Kilo Four-Zero, over," he called out. "Kilo Main, this is Kilo Four-Zero, over," he tried another. "Any station this is Kilo Four-Zero over, we need immediate medevac, over." But nothing but static came back. "Damn it!" he slammed the hand set down. "Comms are still out, or blocked. Okay Henderson, get everyone up."

It didn't take long for the group to gather and the gunnery sergeant got right to the point.

"We need to get Weise out of here," Stacker reported. "So we'll load him and Perez into the Hog with a security detail and send them to New Alexandria."

"We got a problem with that gunny," Corporal Brown cut in.

"What's that?" Stacker turned sharply to the lean trooper.

"Hogs low on fuel," the UNSC Army NCO reported. "All the jerries are empty too. We've exceeded the anticipated range for this mission. It'll never make it all the way."

Stacker sighed heavily and rubbed his scruff goatee beard with scarred hands, weighing all the possibilities as everyone else

avoided eye contact. Resolved, he declared, "Right, well then we pull out ASAP and hump it back."

"That'll likely take four days," Henderson pointed out.

"And what about the Covenant landing force?" Mike added. "It's still out there and still a threat."

"There are lots of threats to Reach, son," Stacker responded grimly. "We've set them back on their heels. We've bought some time," he added doggedly. Then turning to Henderson the ODST NCO answered the implied question. "Doc'll keep Weise alive for four days, no problem," he stated emphatically, "won't you Doc?"

Mandy nodded her head vigorously in agreement, caught up in the moment.

"So we set the wounded up in the Hog until it runs out of juice then we carry from there. We may get lucky and come across some other UNSC forces along the way or the comms may clear up. Regardless, we're getting our boy to treatment. Any questions?"

The other operators all nodded their head in determined agreement. Mike and Natalia wisely stayed out of the conversation as they knew this wasn't their call.

Corporal Chin and two other operators ranged ahead of the main column as it moved slowly away from the Covenant landing zone. Thus far they'd seemed to attract no attention. Still, that didn't mean there weren't any other attackers between them and their objective. Private Weise lay on an improvised gurney in the back of the Warthog between the LAAG housing and the front seats while the also injured Private Perez sat in the passenger's seat. Gunny Stacker led the main column while Mike was off to the left providing flank cover. Mandy hunched over the wounded ODST in the Warthog while Natalia walked in the column just behind the vehicle. The two women occasionally took glances at each other but nothing was overt. The rest of the UNSC troops were spread out in a loose formation.

They'd made it past mid-day without incident then kept moving though taking regular rest intervals until darkness fell before making camp for the night. There was little talk; most were saving their energy for the continued march.

Still nothing could be raised on the radio. Mike though was restless and edgy so kept coming and going from the camp. The Spartan would patrol out then return to report to Stacker and setting out again. Mandy noticed this, and also that his limp was starting to become more pronounced. Staying up later then she would have liked she checked on the two wounded ODSTs but really was waiting to see if Mike would return but he didn't. Finally, exhausted from the day's march, she turned in.

Mandy awoke the next morning to the glow of sunlight just peeking out from behind a distant mountain range. She looked around and saw the other troopers were eating and adjusting their kit for the day's march. She got up, checked on Weise and then went over to sit with Gunny Stacker. Natalia sat off by herself alone. The medic realized Mike wasn't there.

"Where's Mike?" Mandy asked.

"Six? Out sweeping the route of our advance. We'll reel him in I reckon probably around mid-morning," the ODST NCO predicted in his southern drawl.

"Was he up all night?"

"Probably," Stacker answered, looking at her with curiosity. The perceptive Marine could see Natalia glaring at the woman and couldn't help but chuckle. "I guess my advice would have been better given to the hogs, like my daddy used to say."

"Umm, wellâ€¦," Mandy stumbled, her faced reddening.

"Don't worry about it, Doc," Stacker set her at ease. "You're a big girl; you can take care of yourself. We've seen that. You'd have made a good ODST."

The woman was stunned by the rare compliment. "Thank you," she breathed, her voice choked with emotion.

"You earned it," the seasoned veteran responded. Looking at her anew he asked bluntly, "So what's your concern with Six?"

He had read right through her. "I don't think he slept at all last night. He keeps coming and going. Plus I think his injured leg is bothering him. I'm worried about him."

"Are you worried about his combat effectiveness or worried about him?" Stacker asked pointedly.

Again Mandy looked away in embarrassment but decided to be honest. "I'm worried about him," she confessed.

"Do you know how someone becomes a Spartan?" the NCO asked, his voice dropping.

"Well, I've read a bit about the enhancements. Most of the info is classified though. I do know that they are physically augmented so they can wear their armor system."

"That's part of it." Stacker looked over at Natalia then back at the concerned woman. "They are enhanced physically but also psychologically. They're made to be able to become stronger when things get bad, to draw energy from injury, and turn to crisis into opportunity. He knows we're in a tough spot and so he's going into the zone."

"That's terrible," Mandy whispered.

"Naw, the situations not that bad. We'll make New Alexandria all right," the Marine tried to encourage her, missing her point.

"That's not what I meant," Mandy corrected him. "I think what they did to him is terrible."

"How so?" Stacker asked.

"You're basically telling me they've altered the human psyche so that when they're at risk or injured they fight harder rather than seeking aid."

"That's right."

"Can't you see the danger of that?" Mandy pressed, her voice rising. "It's a death sentence! When they should withdraw for healing they instead keep going right over the abyss."

"I guess. It makes them helluva good soldiers in a pinch though," Stacker confessed but then his voice became hard. "Listen Doc, I like you. But you know what? This is a war for our survival and there's going to be casualties. I don't like it any more than you do but I also don't like to see glassed planets." He paused to allow the words to sink in. Then, he patted her on the shoulder to comfort her and said, "Come on, we need to get ready to move."

By mid-morning as Stacker had predicted the main body had caught up to Mike. Mandy had taken the time to ponder the discussion she'd had with the ODST and she still didn't like it. Seeing Mike alone caused her compassion to only grow.

The Spartan knelt down by a rocky outcrop, nodding to the two ODSTs leading the way, allowing the main body to catch up before he got up and kept going, though it was obvious he was favoring his leg. He gave the gunnery sergeant an update then drifted off to the left flank again, putting himself between the likely location of the Covenant and the small party of humans. Mandy saw the limp from her perch in the Warthog as did Natalia.

The proud woman saw not only the limp but the medic continually noticing him. She wasn't sure what to think. Was it anger? Frustration? Or was it jealousy? Natalia didn't know. She'd never experienced the emotion before so really had nothing to compare it to. Mike had spoken with her little since coming back from his mission and hadn't mentioned her declaration of love. The woman was sure he'd heard it but now wasn't certain. Should she tell him again? Leave it to him to respond? She didn't know. Frustration grew.

A warning light came on in her HUD along with an alarm claxon. It wasn't enemy, rather something diagnostic. Natalia had never paid attention when the technician was running over how the adapted MJOLINIR armor suit worked when it had been presented to her. She remembered the day. Her father was there, proud and in control. MacKenzie hovered around, telling her how sexy she'd look in it, always ready with a compliment. He really was a good man. Why couldn't she settle for him? But that was the problem. It would be settling. MacKenzie feared her in some ways: for her aggression and her pedigree as all men before him had. She couldn't respect that. Mike, on the other hand, not only didn't fear her but could care less what her name was. And she loved him for that.

The warning light flashed more urgently and the alarm began to warble. Suddenly she found it difficult to maintain her pace, like she was walking through quicksand. Her pace began to drop and first the two UNSC Army soldiers passed her then the rear guard of ODSTs caught up and passed her as well.

Stacker got a signal from the operators and circled back, an

irritated look on his face. "Something caught your eye, ma'am?" he asked casually but trying to make a point.

"No," she answered nervously. "No, everything's fine."

"Well would you mind picking up the pace then," he declared pointedly.

"Sure, no problem," she responded trying to sound casual but beginning to panic. Then the blinking light went solid red and the alarm went to a higher pitch just as she froze dead in her track. Despite everything she tried she couldn't move.

"Come on, stop screwing around, you can't fall behind," the gunnery sergeant called back angrily.

"I can't move," Natalia answered, almost ready to cry. "My suit's malfunctioning."

"What?" the ODST NCO asked incredulously.

"Something's wrong with my suit. I can't move," Natalia declared in embarrassment.

Stacker called a halt and the rest of the column including the Warthog came back to where the miserable ONI officer was dead in her tracks.

"What's up gunny?" Corporal Henderson asked.

"Suit malfunction, she can't move in it," he answered, trying to sound neutral but a definite edge on it.

The situation caused a degree of amusement among the young Marines who took delight in the woman's embarrassment.

"Okay, we've got to get her out of it," Stacker stated.

"Get a can opener," one of the ODST operators stated sarcastically.

"Funny," he responded without humor. "We need to find the emergency release and get her out."

"Wait a second there gunny, that's not going to happen." Mike tromped into the conversation and stood aggressively beside Natalia.

"What's going on Tali?" Mike asked quietly.

"I'm sorry. Something's gone wrong with the suit. I can't move. Nothing responds," she answered in humiliation. "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do."

"Save it," he cut her off brusquely. Then looking around he did a cursory inspection. "Looks like the hydraulics are malfunctioning. And she's not coming out of the suit."

"Of course we wouldn't leave it behind for the Covvies, we'll blow it up," Stacker answered, trying to get things back on track.

"That's not what I mean," Mike shot back tensely. "We're not taking her out of the suit," the Spartan declared aggressively. "She'd have no armor protection. We can't leave her that exposed."

"What? Kind of like us?" Corporal Brown huffed under his breath.

Natalia heard the comment from the Army trooper and her face reddened inside her helmet.

"And we can't stay here, we're sitting ducks," Stacker noted, irritation growing. "If she can't move then we can't either. We have to push on. If you want to stay with her, fine, we'll send recovery back with we get to New Alexandria. We got no option."

The ODSs looked at each other in surprise at the declaration. An awkward silence overtook the group.

"I worked a P-5000 Power Loader when I was back on the farm," Private Shoemaker piped up. "If it's the hydraulics I might be able to fix it."

"A Caterpillar Loader? You're kidding me right, Josh?" Corporal Brown cut in. "This is a multi-million dollar piece of technology and you think you can fix it like a civvie mech?"

"Hey, it's worth a try," Mike shot back.

"Just do it," Stacker shot out walking away in frustration. "Rest of you, defensive formation."

"Mike, Iâ€¦" Natalia tried to say but he again cut her off.

"Don't worry about it," he answered. "We'll get you sorted out and back on-line, relax."

She couldn't tell his facial expression behind the visor. Was that sympathy? Anger? Disgust? It was beginning to drive her crazy. She did see Mandy give a smirk and then run over to treat Mike's leg wound. She tried to move in response but was still stuck. In frustration she screamed at the top of her lungs though she was smart enough to turn off her comms so no one heard.

The Army private moved over and looked at the suit for a few minutes, not saying anything.

"Well, what do you think?" Mike asked, as Mandy gave him an injection into one of the med ports on the suit.

"Let me see," the young soldier said to himself, kneeling down at the back of the suit. "There we go."

"Do you got it?" Stacker joined in, asking with a degree of anxiety.

"This looks like the entry into the control panel," Shoemaker confirmed. "Ma'am, is this the right spot?"

Natalia suddenly realized she'd no clue. She'd been given a briefing by the Misriah Armory technical team but hadn't paid attention. The

impetuous woman had been more interested in putting it through its paces then learning how it ran that day. She suspected she'd been told but didn't know. Shame growing by the second her first impulse was to lie and go along with it. No one would know.

But she would.

People's lives were at stake. She wouldn't allow her arrogance to put people's lives at more risk. "I don't know," Natalia swallowed her pride and answered honestly. "I was given a briefing about the suit but didn't pay attention. I'm really sorry," she added.

"Oh man, that's just great," Corporal Henderson spat out in disgust, walking angrily away from the scene.

Stacker rubbed his eyes in fatigue but said nothing to Natalia. Instead he said to the Army trooper. "Okay son, it's up to you. We need you to make this happen."

Shoemaker nodded his head understanding what was riding on this. "Brownie," he called to his partner, "I need the tool kit in the Hog." With that, the unassuming soldier got to work.

Stacker wandered off to check on his operators but Mike stayed by Natalia's side though he said nothing. Mandy stood next to him, close enough that there was no daylight between the pair. Natalia's heart ached but there was little to do. She had become the center of attention she desperately didn't want.

Shoemaker was able to pop open the hatch in the MJOLNIR armor and began to poke around.

"Gunny, we got tangos inbound," Corporal Chin reported over the team channel. "It's not a big party, Grunts and Jackals with a pair of Skirmishers, but they're on course to intercept."

"Confirm, I have them on my HUD," Mike added, snapping to attention and adjusting the range on his IFF.

"Great, here we are with our pants down," Stacker exclaimed. "Where are we at, son?" he asked Shoemaker.

"There's definitely an issue with the servos," he reported, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. "I'm trying to jury-rig it."

"Make it fast," Stacker encouraged. "Everyone, stand to. We got inbounds," he called out to the rest of the team.

"I'll take my guys, hook up with Chin and we'll lead them off," Mike stated, slapping a fresh mag into his assault rifle. "We don't want them anywhere near us."

"Roger that, move," Stacker confirmed, "rest of you, eyes front."

As Mike pulled out Natalia wanted to call out to him, say something, apologize anew but she couldn't. She'd already done enough. All she could do was pray he'd come back and he'd look at her again like he once had.

Mandy had taken it all in and as Mike moved she went back to the

Warthog to continue monitoring the two wounded ODSs. She could only imagine how Natalia must feel. The compassionate woman took no delight in the other's misfortune. Plus it put them all at risk. She did note that Mike was quick to jump in and put himself once again in harm's way. The intelligent medic remembered her conversation with Gunny Stacker. "Oh Mike, if only you knew there was another way," she whispered to herself.

26. Chapter 26

****chapter 26 ****

****August 19, 1037 hours, Somewhere in Eposz District, Planet Reach****

Mike pushed hard moving away from the impromptu encampment wanting to regain the initiative and keep the enemy patrol away from the vulnerable spot. He could hear the ODSs with him starting to pant to keep up despite the excellent physical condition they were in. But they also weren't in MJOLNIR.

"I'm going to stay on this arc and draw them away. Hook up with Corporal Chin and come after me."

"But sirâ€¦," one of the operators began to protest.

"No time for discussion," Mike countered. "If the Covvies catch even a whiff of what we're protecting we're screwed. They have to know by now there's a small team of humans with a Spartan out here. Let's make sure that's all they think is out there."

"Good hunting," the ODS responded to the logical plan.

Mike started into a trot regardless of the pain from his leg injury. Despite the hitch in his gait he was fast enough and could block out the pain. He was once again the Lone Wolf and on the hunt.

Checking his IFF as he approached the enemy party Mike could tell by their movement they knew something was coming. Not breaking pace he came out of a small defile to engage the enemy on the open plain. They seemed surprised to see a Spartan and at least half the Grunts panicked and began to run around with their stubby arms flapping in the air. Mike led with a fragmentation grenade that landed in the center of the remaining Grunts. Three went down in the initial blast while another was taken out by an exploding methane tank. He then gunned down the remaining two who had squeezed off a ragged volley of Plasma Rifle fire with a burst of fire from his assault rifle.

Two of the Jackals caught Mike in a crossfire of Needler rounds. Their fire was accurate so the shards began to drain his shield as they impacted. The Spartan countered with a grenade towards one of the pair. The avian creature nimbly rolled out of the way avoiding the blast but Mike anticipated that, walking assault rifle fire into its unprotected body as it came out of the roll before it could get its handheld shield up. The shredded Jackal kept rolling from the impact of the high velocity slugs while Mike turned his fire to the other. It ducked behind its shield which turned aside the blast. The Spartan kept up his fire but sprinted towards the defensive Jackal while the Skirmishers tried to bring their fire to bear on him. He

slammed into the shield and his momentum turned it aside. White pain lanced up his leg as he twisted his injured leg stumbling momentarily. But in a flash he was up and quickly smashed the butt end of his assault rifle down onto the snout of the Kig-Yar before it could get its shield up, stunning it. Then rotating his upper body hard he brought it up and between the eyes of the scavenger. Its shield and weapon went flying as Mike bashed away until its face was a bloody pulp.

The shield alarm on his armor went off reminding him there were other attackers out there. He blindly tossed a grenade as he moved away to allow the shield to recharge. His instinct was correct as it landed near the attacking Skirmishers disrupting their attack. Changing mags as he moved he then brought fire to bear. A stream of 51mm slugs did the trick bringing the first Kig-Yar down.

The remaining Grunts had reorganized themselves but Mike used that to his advantage maneuvering between them and the Skirmisher. The slower moving Unggoy had trouble adjusting while disrupting the Kig-Yar's fire. Satisfied he was back in control of the fight Mike tossed a grenade into the too tightly massed Grunts scattering them anew then he went after the Skirmisher and finished it off with a sustained burst of fire. The Lone Wolf then systematically hunted down and eliminated the remaining Grunts just as the ODSTs arrived on the scene.

"What? You didn't leave any for us?" the leading operator declared.

"Spartans get all the fun," another added.

"Stow it," Corporal Chin cut in. "Is the area clear?" he asked.

Mike checked his IFF. "Yea, we're good."

"Okay, let's compress back to the main body," Chin stated, not interested in hanging around.

Reforming, the small party turned and headed back to the rest with Mike in the lead.

"The guy took out that whole patrol," one of the young ODSTs behind Mike declared admiringly.

"What did you expect?" He's a Spartan," his partner commented. "They're killing machines."

Killing machines.

Mike heard the comment which was said in admiration but it had the opposite effect on the man who was beginning to grapple with his feelings.

That's what I am he said to myself. _How can I be anything else?_ The feelings that were churning within suddenly felt foolish.

The small group made steady progress though the one leading felt as if several hundred kilos had been added to his weight.

Back at the main body, Josh Shoemaker tinkered around inside the

control panel for the MJOLNIR suit but still hadn't been able to crack the problem.

Corporal Brown walked over. "How you doing, Josh?"

"I think I can figure it out. The hydraulics are more sophisticated by seem to work essentially the same," he grunted, not looking up from his work. "I think a relay is down. If I can find it, I think we'll be good to do."

"Good luck," Brown snorted derisively and walked away.

Natalia knew no one thought this would work and was in fact a waste of time. She prayed no one got hurt during the delay. Any icy grip of fear had also begun to creep in. She feared being out of the suit for a growing number of reasons. Sweat dripped down her back despite the suit's life support system still functioning. Though everyone was doing something she felt as if they were all looking at her. This was not the attention she'd once craved. Yet despite her fear and anxiety she didn't fear death. Why?

Then Mike and the other ODSs with him came into view cresting a small rise off to their side. Natalia could see all were there and breathed a sigh of relief though she could see his limp becoming more pronounced. Mandy noticed it as well but held her position, waiting for her opportunity. The Spartan dropped the operators at Stacker to report and he came right over to where Natalia was planted.

"So, any luck?" he asked Private Shoemaker.

"No, not yet, sir," the Army trooper confessed. "But I think I'm getting closer."

Stacker came over to join the conversation. "Sitrep?" he asked tensely.

"Still nothing," Mike reported.

"Its decision time, Six," the ODS NCO declared. "That was a scouting party and that means there's more where they came from. We can't stick around. So either we pop her out of it or you stay behind. Either way, we're saddling up and moving out."

"She's not coming out of the suit," Mike declared.

"Suit yourself," Stacker shrugged without any note of irony. "Prep to move," he called out to the rest.

"Gunny, you sure about this?" Corporal Henderson asked, uncomfortable with what was happening.

Just then there was a series of clicks then whirs from the suit and suddenly Natalia was able to raise her arms.

"Hallelujah!" Shoemaker whooped as the MJOLNIR armor came back to life.

"You did it," Stacker declared in disbelief. "Son, you're wasting your time in the infantry," he stated, patting the trooper on the back. "So, now can we leave?" he asked Mike, though with a look of

relief on his face.

"Yea, let's get going," he answered in return.

As the others began to move Natalia grabbed Shoemaker's hand before he could leave. "Thank you so much," she choked out as she began to cry, overcome with relief.

"No problem, ma'am," he responded humbly. "I'm just glad we could get it up and running." Then the sensitive trooper looked around and said quietly to the woman as the group prepped to move. "Come with me for a sec."

The pair moved out of earshot and Shoemaker opened a compartment on the front of Natalia's suit she'd never known existed. The trooper pulled out a small poly-plastic box.

"Listen, this is a maintenance kit," he said quietly, shielding it so others couldn't see. "You need to use the stuff in here regularly or the same things are going to happen. If you're not sure what to do you can likely pull up a user manual on your HUD, okay?" he told her without a note of condemnation or judgment.

Natalia instantly realized the implications of what she'd just been told. Not only that, but the soldier who was younger than her had gone out of his way to not embarrass her. "If there's ever anything I can do for you," her voice trailed off as overwhelming emotions choked it out.

Shoemaker nodded his head in understanding, a happy look on his face and looked off towards Corporal Brown.

"You okay?" Mike asked, coming up beside her.

"I am now," she confessed as the climate control system kicked in to defog her visor from all her crying. Then she decided to take a risk. "How about you?"

Mike paused for a moment and his helmeted head tilted to the side as if he were pondering something. Instead of answering he said, "Come on, we've got ground to make up."

The UNSC party moved warily but swiftly throughout the remainder of the day. Several times red splotches came up on the edge of the IFF but nothing came close to their ever-changing position. Stacker kept pushing through sundown and into the early stages of night before calling a halt. Once again improvised shelter was erected around the Warthog which became the center of the temporary encampment. While guards were set for the night Mike restlessly did a long sweep of the area. This had become the norm for the increasingly anxious Spartan. Satisfied the area was secure he headed back to their position, nodding to the ODST sentry silently guarding the perimeter.

The remainder of the camp settled down to get what rest they could. Natalia stayed within the perimeter but kept to herself. Though no one said anything about the malfunction to her armor now that they were on their way she struggled to let it go. The proud woman had never felt more vulnerable or useless, even compared to her initial days of combat at the start of the actions on Reach. She was more of an outsider with the ODSTs it seems than she'd been with Noble Team.

It seemed hard to believe. Then there was the Army Medic Mandy. Just the thought of the woman made Natalia's blood boil and she wasn't sure why. Was it competitiveness? Jealousy? The woman had made a connection with Mike and that bothered her. A lot. Natalia's eyes tracked to Mike's form returning to camp out of the dark and she stood to go to him, to talk to him, to explain. Something. But Mandy was quicker and left the wounded ODSF she'd been monitoring and got to the Spartan first leaving Natalia to do a slow burn.

Mike returned, gave a brief report to Stacker and then sat down gingerly on a protruding rock. The tension that had built earlier in the day between him and the NCO disappeared as the mission unfolded. The Spartan understood the ODSFs position and would have taken the same one if he'd been in his shoes. He hoped the gunnery sergeant was doing the same thing for him. Mike carefully extended his throbbing leg to try to get relief from the pain.

The Spartan took off his helmet and automatically grabbed a ration bar then bit into the unappetizing fuel source. He wondered anew at the whole incident with Natalia and her armor malfunction. Mike was still surprised as the ferocity of his reaction though on the surface it hadn't appeared that way. It was more than about operational efficiency. He'd been wanting to protect the vulnerable woman. His head told him it was her own fault and she should have been more aware but his heart knew that to be unfair. She'd been thrust into a situation not of her own choosing or even making. She'd done her best and in some ways deserved better. A thought then struck him like a hammer to the head. She was a lot like him. In many ways she was a pawn just like he was. Perhaps the gulf between them wasn't as big as he'd initially thought. He then noticed Mandy leave her position watching over Private Weise to come over towards him.

"I want to look at that leg, Mike," the chestnut brown haired medic asked.

"It's fine," he replied absently.

"You can't keep walking on it like that," she responded doggedly.

"I said its fine," he answered tersely.

"Dammit, it's not fine!" she shot back. "If you keep up like this you'll do permanent damage," she explained, spontaneously grabbing his hand.

Mike was taken aback by the passionate response of the woman and wasn't sure how to respond. He pulled back, dropping her hand. He'd not been taught that his personal comfort or health was of any importance. His role was the press on, press the attack, and win the day. He fought the nurturing instinct of the attractive woman looking intently into his eyes. But something else deep within him was clawing its way to the surface, something that crashed through the barriers of sacrifice and duty, which screamed she was right. The two battled inside him so he took the easy way out and allowed the dominant voice to win.

"Why does it matter? It's not hurting my operational efficiency," he responded to her entreaty.

"Operational efficiency? You think that's what this is about?" she

cried.

"Well, what is it about then?" he asked in genuine confusion.

"Mike, I care about you," she cried, taking his hand anew, "I don't want to see you become another statistic of this war." Mandy paused for a moment, as if weighing what to say. "You're special to me," she confessed.

"Why? Because I saved your life?" Mike asked.

"You know, for a guy who's so intuitive in battle you're pretty thick," Mandy retorted, punching him in the arm, frustrated at his inability to understand what she was saying. "No, special as in 'I have feelings for you' special."

Special? He was special in that way? Mike knew he was special. He was a Spartan, a supersoldier. But this was different. This was special in matters of the heart, like what Natalia had said to him two days earlier.

"Mandy, Iâ€|.", "

"Just let me help you, please!" the woman declared, realizing she may have overstepped things.

"I'm not sure that you can," Mike confessed averting her probing eyes with more than one meaning to the declaration.

"Let me try," she leaned in again, her eyes pleading.

"You really mean it, don't you?" he asked in confirmation seeing her nod her head vigorously. "This armor is pretty hard to get in and out of," he answered. Set off guard by the declaration of the attractive medic Mike decided to speak to the easiest of the issues.

"Can't we just remove a plate?"

"No, this is powered assault armor. See, while the outer shell is a titanium alloy underneath I also have on a titanium nanocomposite bodysuit. It all has to come off; you just can't take off parts."

"So? Let's do it then Mike," Mandy declared doggedly. "I hate seeing you like this."

"It's not that easy," he answered gently, touched by her obvious compassion for him. "We need the right facilities to get in and out."

"Where?"

"They'd likely have something that would work at New Alexandria but it's pretty hard to do in the field," Mike told her.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" she leaned in passionately, her lips parting.

Mike sighed, unsure what to do. Conflicted feelings swirled inside of him. "Just keep me going until we can get somewhere and have this

treated. Maybe another shot of whatever you gave me before in the Biofoam injecting port would help."

Natalia watched the interaction between Mike and the medic and felt her heart drop. Every time the woman touched him or leaned in closer it was as if a piece of her heart was being ripped away. Her instincts brought her to her feet and she felt herself unconsciously tightening the grip on her assault rifle. Dark thoughts clouded her mind.

"Whoa, Tali," she cautioned herself, "take it easy."

She loved Mike; she really loved him and believed in her heart of hearts that she would be good for him. But then a new thought struck her- did she love him enough to let him go? He was not a toy or a trophy; he was a man, a man used by a system she'd benefited from. If she really cared it had to be about him and not her wants. Taking a deep breath she sat down and tried to get her beating heart to slow down, a new resolve and a new thought in her mind that she'd never experienced before.

Natalia watched the medic give him a shot of something through his armor, put her hand on his shoulder then lean in close to say something before moving back to her position with Private Weise. A new resolve entered into Natalia Misriah, one that would have been unconceivable a month ago yet her feelings were strong enough it didn't matter.

Mike pondered the conversation he'd had with Mandy and he found himself more confused than before. Absently his hand drifted to one of the utility pouches on his uniform. Pulling out Jorge's dog tags he stared at them and was taken back to the scene in the hangar of the corvette, upset anew by what went down. "That should have been me," he whispered to himself. He thought he'd locked his emotions away in a deep, dark place years ago. He was the Lone Wolf, a super soldier killing machine, he didn't feel. Yet his heart ached for Noble Five, no, for his friend, who'd sacrificed himself. Then there was Mandy and Natalia, his heart was confused, unsure, timid. He never knew a vital organ used to pump blood throughout his body could create such emotional turmoil.

"Mike, can I speak to you for a minute?"

Natalia stood in front of him. He'd never even heard her come up. Helmet off, even in the dark her emerald green eyes pierced his armor and hit him in the vital organ he'd just been contemplating.

Unsure what to say he nodded his head in ascent.

"I'm sorry about today," she apologized, "how I almost screwed up the mission."

"Don't worry about it," Mike tried to brush it off, "these things happen."

"No, it shouldn't have. I was given maintenance instructions but I didn't pay attention. There were things I needed to do to keep it functioning and I haven't," she confessed, anguish written on her face.

Mike was impressed by the proud woman's honesty. "Lessons learned, huh?"

"Yea, for sure." The woman dropped her gaze to avoid eye contact. "Thank you for sticking up for me."

"Teammates don't abandon each other," Mike declared. "You would have done the same thing for me."

"Iâ€¦I won't stand in the wayâ€¦if she's the one you want, I mean," Natalia suddenly blurted out, eyes looking down at the ground.

"What?" Mike declared in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Mike, I love you," Natalia reaffirmed. "But I also want you to be happy. God knows you deserve it after everything you've been through. You're a good man, better than you probably realize. I know we're in a war and may never get off Reach but I want to be with you even if for a short time." She stopped and took a deep breath. "But if Mandy will make you happier I'll step aside."

Mike could see the look of hurt and confusion in the woman's expressive eyes and it condemned him. Then realization of the selfless offer finally sunk in. "Tali, Iâ€¦wowâ€¦," he breathed heavily, overcome by the emotions of the moment. This was definitely new ground and while the feelings building within grew they also felt like he was being sucked into a black hole.

"Please Mike, no pressure," Natalia misread his response.

"It's not that," he replied. "Tali, I care about youâ€¦ a lot. It's just this is all new to me." He realized he still had Jorge's dog tags in his hand. "For the longest time I never felt anything but rage. Then you came along, I join Noble Team and suddenly I'm around people I care about and care about me." He paused to regain control of his building feelings. "Then Jorge dies instead of me, you kiss meâ€¦"

"I didn't mean it to upset you," Natalia burst in.

"It didn't. I liked it," he confessed.

"Then what? What can I do?" she grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

"You're a Misriah and I'm a freak of science."

"I don't care about any of that," she declared emphatically, "I only care about you."

"Yea, but your father would care. Command would care," Mike countered.

"Well we're here right now and none of those things matter," she shot back doggedly, holding her ground.

"Maybe, we'll see." Mike nodded his head, as if resolved but considering. "But for now, I've got a lot to think about."

"Okay, that makes sense," Natalia admitted grudgingly. "But think about this."

Without waiting the woman leaned in and kissed Mike hard on the lips. At first he didn't respond but she didn't back off, instead she put her arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer. Mike surrendered to the moment and allowed the feeling to consume him. His lips parted and her tongue shot in probing for his. The two appendages interlocked, dancing with each other for a length of time Mike didn't know. He didn't care, he was in bliss. Then someone moved nearby in the camp, breaking the magic of the moment. With a captivating smile, Natalia returned to the darkness without saying a word. She didn't need to. Her actions spoke volumes.

Restless anew, but in a different way, Mike slipped from the camp though his leaving, and the previous incident had not gone unnoticed by a certain medic.

Stacker had the group up before first light and pushed the pace. They were still behind from the previous days stop. Plus he wanted to keep moving before the Warthog's fuel cells dried up. After the skirmish there was an unstated expectation that it wasn't a matter of 'if' they ran into the Covenant again but 'when'. At regular intervals the small UNSC party tried to reach other humans in the area on the radio but communications were still out so they continued to plod on towards New Alexandria. The good news was that Private Weise's condition seemed to be improving. Though still unconscious the wounded ODS'T had stabilized, a fact that Stacker and the others attributed to Mandy's medical skill. That did nothing to help Natalia's mood or feelings towards the woman. But, she'd laid it on the line with Mike the evening before and the door seemed to be open. Still, the waiting was killing her.

Mike walked in a flanking position to the column, near the center where the Warthog moved. Alone with his thoughts the Spartan had much to consider. He was on edge, feeling something. The shot he'd been given helped his leg but he knew it was broken and needed attention. No time for that now though.

Mandy watched him and decided it was time for the direct approach after witnessing the kiss the night before. Making sure Weise was secure she hopped out of the moving Warthog and trotted over to Mike's position, matching his pace. Though he nodded to her he said nothing.

Taking a deep breath, the woman spoke: "What's going on with you and the ONI woman?" Mandy asked.

"Why do you ask?" Mike answered warily.

"I'm curious, or maybe I'm interested," she added playfully.

"I don't know," he confessed, "it's complicated."

"But you haven't given her a ring, right?" she asked bluntly.

"What?" Mike answered, caught off guard. "No," Mike continued, a bit confused by the question. "I meanâ€|noâ€|no, I haven't."

"Good, that's all I want to know." She kissed her fingers then pressed them up onto the visor of his helmet then skipped off to her position in the column.

Mike shook his head now more confused and conflicted than before. Suddenly he desperately wanted to go back to his former position doing solo ops. It was way less complicated.

Then he noticed the fast moving red blip come up on his HUD. "We got an inbound!" he called out. "Likely a Banshee, stand too!"

"Defensive formation!" Stacker called out. "Everyone circle up around the Hog, that's our strong point!"

With a sense of urgency the UNSC troops moved into position just as the Banshee appeared as a dot in the sky. If it had been on a routine patrol it wasn't anymore, likely detecting the humans at the same time they did.

More red blips appeared on the edge of Mike's HUD. "We got more in bounds, likely ground forces," he reported.

"Crap," Stacker spit out. "Okay, good a ground as any," the seasoned NCO declared, making a quick assessment of the terrain. "Look alive Helljumpers, walk in the parks done, time to earn our pay!"

On cue the Banshee screamed in unleashing a stream of fire from its twin plasma cannons causing the ground to boil around the Warthog which seemed to be its target. In response the LAAG gunner opened up with a deafening salvo from the M41 unleashing a stream of slugs at a rate of 500 rounds per minute driving the Covenant fighter out of its attack pattern. As it banked high and wide for another pass the gunner ceased fire but continued to track its movement.

Realizing they were a target Mandy hauled Private Weise out of the exposed back and with the help of another operator pushed him under the Force Application Vehicle. As the ground support fighter began another attack the ground nearby churned so instinctively the medic threw her body over the unconscious Marine to shield him.

"Keep that Banshee off of us," Stacker shouted above the noise to the gunner. "Rest of you, prepare to repel ground forces."

The ODST manning the M41 was a skilled shot. As the fighter dropped into its dive he was able to clip the stabilizer of the nimble craft causing the Sangheili pilot to lose maneuverability. Unable to juke and weave the craft was an easy target for the torrent of 99mm rounds which sliced through the fighter causing it to drop crazily to the ground and explode in a fireball. The ODSTs whooped at the spectacle but were silenced by another dark blip on the horizon. Another Banshee was inbound. It proved fortunate for a mixed party of Covenant infantry attacked right after the discovery, pressing the defensive formation hard.

With the remaining high-flying support fighter swooping in and out and the Covenant ground forces hitting them from multiple positions the human forces were fully engaged. The operator on the Warthog's LAAG did the best he could to keep the new Banshee off their position but as he drew a bead and opened fire anew driving the fighter off an

Elite broke through the UNSC line and tagged the operator with a burst of molten fire from his Plasma Rifle. It hit the ODSF square in the back and he was thrown hard out of the vehicle and to the ground.

Mandy didn't see any of this, still huddled over the unconscious private shielding him from the fire zipping through the air. The Elite charged through the gap, sensing not only an easy kill but also the opportunity to destroy the human weapon that had kept their attack at bay. Mandy didn't see the Sangheili warrior coming, nor did anyone else.

Except Natalia.

The ONI officer had dispatched two Grunts who'd run through her position and she had a temporary reprieve. She saw the ODSF fall out of the Warthog and the Elite charging towards the unsuspecting Mandy to finish her off. A wicked thought crossed the woman's mind. In a moment her main competition for Mike would be gone and no one could do anything to stop it.

No one except her.

The competitive woman lowered her assault rifle and turned away from the scene looking for another target.

That choice only lasted a moment.

She spun back around and opened fire with her MA37 walking fire into the unprepared Elite. The stream of slugs caught it in mid-stride, knocking it back. With a roar the Sangheili warrior turned to the source of the new threat, snapping off a shot in the general direction which sizzled past Natalia. She took the opportunity to bring the stream of bullets into the center of mass. The Elite's shield dropped and a half dozen rounds ripped through the Sangheili's armor as Natalia emptied her mag. The Elite let out a death scream causing Mandy to look up as the warrior thudded into the bumper and fell to the ground dead. The medic realized how close she'd been to death but didn't know who'd saved her life.

But Natalia did.

Slapping a fresh magazine into her rifle she moved out to engage a pair of Jackals, conflicted by the decision she'd made but knowing in her heart she'd made the right one.

It turns out she wasn't the only one. Mike had been tangling with the other Elite and though out of position to help, with his tactical mind he was able to assess the precarious situation as well as Natalia's hesitation and ultimate saving of the day. That left him more to consider.

Another ODSF took position behind the Warthog's LAAG successfully knocking the remaining Banshee out of the sky while the rest of the UNSC forces destroyed the Covenant ground forces. Stacker took no time to assess or debrief other than treating the wounded gunner, who turned out only to have superficial burns and besides two other lightly hurt ODSFs the rest turned out well. Pushing on the humans continued their journey.

Luck was with them. Despite several close calls and the ultimate break down of the Warthog which forced them to carry Private Weise in an improvised stretcher, two days later they finally could see the top of the tall buildings of New Alexandria. Yet their elation and anticipated respite was short lived. Smoke rose from the metropolitan city, the regional center was already under attack.

27. Chapter 27

****Chapter 27****

****August 22, 2552 15:34 Hours, New Alexandria, Eposz****

Coming over the rise of a small hill through a thin forested area, Mike crested the rise first with the rest of the ODS'Ts behind. He paused at the sight, his heart dropping. Their anticipated respite was not to be. Three Covenant capital ships, likely corvettes hovered over the metropolis just below the thick slate grey clouds that seemed to threaten rain.

It appeared they had gone from the frying pan and into the fire.

Even from the distance they stood as the rest of the party came into view the sound of explosions, anti-air fire and intense combat could be heard drifting on the breeze. The variety of skyscrapers and other buildings gave a majestic sight but now took on a sinister tone. Within the city limits it was obvious the Covenant were fully engaged with the human defenders.

"Are we too late?" Natalia breathed out in disbelief.

"No, our guys are still fighting, but it's hard to say where things are at," Mike answered grimly.

"What do you think?" Stacker asked, joining the pair.

Mike tabled the comment for a moment. "Noble Actual, this is Noble Six, do you read, over? Noble Actual, do you copy?" Still there was no communications. He had to believe that meant their radios were still being blocked and not that they were all dead. He wouldn't believe that. The Spartan thumbed Jorge's dog tags, remembering his pledge to his friend then putting them back into his chest pouch. Turning to the ODS'T NCO he finally responded. "We move into the city and help where we can."

"All right, spread formation," the NCO called out to his operators. "Look sharp. The fights in the city but that don't mean there's no Tangos on the way."

Leading the way, Mike pressed hard down the hill towards the edge of the city. Coming in from the north they entered into an industrial area filled with boxy manufacturing facilities. It was very quiet and all the action seemed to be to the south.

"Looks like the ones we tangled with haven't gotten here yet," Stacker said in a whisper.

"Yea, this looks like a whole different attack force," Corporal

Henderson agreed. "At least we made a difference."

Stacker held his hand up for them to be quiet as if he were listening to something. "Tactical comms are coming back up."

"What's going on Gunny?" a trooper asked as they crowded around.

"Quiet!" the NCO waved them off. "Okay. It looks like the city is being evacuated of civilians. All units are involved either with extraction or defense. Come on Helljumpers, we need to get in this fight and lend a hand."

Mike had picked up the same channel but still had nothing from Noble Team. He saw Natalia looking at him, unsure what they should do. He nodded with his head towards the ODSs. They'd stay with the Helljumpers until something further came up.

As they moved into the industrial area the party climbed up a low building to get a better perspective. Mike was consciously aware that he only had a pistol to fight with. He'd smashed his assault rifle in their last skirmish, breaking it on an Elite he'd battered to death. No matter, he had a feeling that sooner rather than later he'd have access to his choice of weapons.

Staying low, Mike crept to the edge of the building. It was still clear and there was no immediate sound. He jumped down the one story and white pain lanced up from his leg. Staggering slightly he felt Mandy's touch on his shoulder despite the armor between her hand and his body.

"You okay?" she asked with concern.

"Fine," he snarled starting to get into combat mode.

Ignoring the limp Mike led the way past plasma-scarred walls on either side of them. So there had been fighting in this area after all. Everyone tensed at the realization and prepared for first contact.

Moving carefully but steadily down the street they journeyed closer to the center of the city, the sound of combat intensifying but still they had no contact. Tall multi-story condos began to replace the industrial buildings signaling a change in the neighborhood. The sun broke through the clouds shining white on the artistically designed buildings but it cheered no hearts, all knew combat was imminent.

Coming up to a set of stairs that then went down to a lower level at its peak a large sign announced they were arriving into a concourse area of the city. Moving into the attractive shopping and meeting area it was marred not only by ugly plasma burns but the bodies of dead civilians. The air was alive as salvos of plasma bolts from the Covenant ships above shot towards the ground while several Falcons roared overhead trying to miss the fire.

An urgent voice came over their comms. "This is Kilo Dispatch: all available teams, advance to Traxus Tower. Evacuation will commence ASAP."

"Copy, Dispatch," Gunny Stacker responded in his distinct southern drawl. Realizing they were already en route to that location and eager to get into the fight, he asked, "What's the status of the tower pad?"

"Tower pad is green. Let's move these civilians before it changes," the dispatcher requested.

"Copy, Dispatch. Four-Zero out." Stacker turned to the rest. "You heard the man. Let's go lend a hand."

"What about our wounded guys?" Corporal Henderson asked.

"Doc?" Stacker turned to Mandy.

"There's a hospital near the same arc," she answered after checking the co-ordinates he'd received. "We should be able to catch the hospital on the way to the Tower."

"All right, let's do it," Stacker declared. "We sweep the area to our front for civvies and heard them to the evac zone but we get our boys help." He turned to Mike, "Six, you got point. Bring us into the fight."

Mike pressed forward aggressively but scanning everywhere. Though quiet it was evident from the recent damage the fighting had been happening recently. Moving into a damaged building he and the rest of the UNSC troops swept it for any civilians but they were greeted only by dead citizens. Stacker called a halt and Mandy came forward to examine several of the bodies.

"They're still warm, gunny," the medic reported grimly, causing an angry rumble from several of the ODSTs.

"You heard the lady," Stacker responded. "We're getting close and we don't allow any more civvies to die like this. Let's move."

Picking up the pace Mike moved out of that building through the other side and moved up towards a concourse. Several red splashes popped up on his HUD. Without hesitating the Spartan bounded up the stairs to engage a trio of Skirmishers. Despite having only a pistol he gunned down the first one with several precision shots while the ODST's behind him shredded the avian scavengers two companions.

"That's more like it!" one of the operators called out triumphantly.

"Stow it!" Stacker snarled back as the continued destruction spoke of the failure of the human efforts to protect the sprawling city.

The group moved into a building in front of it and began another sweep. Suddenly they picked up friendly force radio chatter from a nearby UNSC unit.

"Romeo Company, be advised: we have reports of Covenant suicide squads," an authoritative voice called out.

"You gotta be kidding me...", another responded in exasperation.

"That's a negative," the first one confirmed. "Keep your eyes open, troopers."

"Head's up," Stacker called to his team. "We're close."

The group moved a bit more cautiously which was fortunate since about a minute later a faint blue glow came from below their position down a set of stairs. Several suicide Grunts carrying primed plasma grenades came charging towards them screaming and warbling fanatically.

Mike hit the grenade of the first one causing it to explode while the two lead ODS'T's peppered the Unggoy's partner before it got to the base of the stairs. The humans got into a defensive position in case of another attack by the dangerous fanatics but nothing happen.

Well, not exactly.

Rather than more of the pesky Grunts the building shook from an explosion that causing the structure to sway.

"Let's get out of here!" Stacker yelled as they ran to leave the building.

Coming outside the sky was blocked by a Covenant corvette that was undertaking a systematic bombardment of the area with plasma fire including the building they'd just left.

"Gunny, that thing's got to be taken out or it'll level this neighborhood," Corporal Henderson declared.

"Yea, we need to do something about this," Chin agreed

The gunnery sergeant nodded grimly in agreement then opened a channel on his radio. "Kilo 26, this is Kilo 40," he called. "Covenant corvette is raining hell on us! Final Protective Fire-1, danger close, on my command, over!" he called out for an artillery strike onto their position in an attempt to eliminate the threat.

"Copy, Kilo 40. FPF-1 at your command," the fire controller for the unit confirmed, not questioning the dangerous request. It sounded as if this wasn't the first time he'd heard it.

"Everyone, get to cover, here comes the rain!" Stacker yelled. Once the team was in as good a protective position as they could he then gave the order to commence the bombardment. "Fire FPF-1, over."

"Firing FPF-1... Shot," Kilo 26 replied without emotion.

"Hold on to your helmets!" Stacker called out as the sound like a rushing freight train filled the air. The ground shook violently from the impact of the high explosive, high velocity artillery round on the low flying enemy ship.

"Kilo 40: request FPF sit-rep," the artillery controller called out.

Stacker had to wait for the fog cloud of dust and debris from the

strike to settle down but even before that happened it was evident there'd been no impact. "Negative, 26! Corvette's still coming!"

"Copy, 40. Firing FPF-2... Shot."

Once again the ground shook from the second volley as the humans sought to protect themselves from the violence of the strike. Several chunks of masonry were dislodged from the buildings they sheltered under, two large ones hitting Natalia but her armor protected her. She was thankful her suit had been repaired and she'd not been left without it or she would have been crushed.

And once again when the dust settled the Covenant Corvette was undamaged although, seemingly satisfied, it floated away to rain destruction on another part of the city.

"Damn! How do you stop that thing?" Stacker declared in disbelief.

"Gotta take the shield down first," Mike answered, "then you got a shot. That or you need a MAC round."

The ODST NCO snorted and shook his head in disbelief but there was nothing the Marines and Spartan could do so they continued their sweep. This time they were more successful rescuing several pockets of civilians from roving bands of Covenant infantry. In this area all the invaders efforts seemed to be random and not overly vigorous. Just over two hours later they'd moved further into the center of the city and found the hospital Mandy had suggested. To their great relief the area around it was firmly held by UNSC troops and armor. Though being pressed the line was holding allowing the beleaguered party a respite.

The first order of business was orderlies rushed the unconscious but still living Private Weise into surgery followed by the other wounded ODSTs to get treated. They received word a short time later that Weise had regained consciousness and would live.

"Your man is going to make it," the surgeon reported with a smile.

"Hallelujah!" Stacker shouted as the other operators celebrated the bit of good news.

"Once we're finished and he's stabile we're going to evac him off the planet with the other critical cases. It's too dangerous here for them," the doctor reported.

Stacker and the other ODSTs were torn by mixed feelings at the news their team member would be leaving without him. "Can we see him before he goes?" the gunnery sergeant asked.

"No troubles, I'll make sure of that," the surgeon answered compassionately. He turned to go back to work, but stopped. "Is it true you guys carried him for over two days to get him here?"

"Damn right!" Stacker responded. "We leave no one behind."

The doctor walked away shaking his head in admiration and wonder as

the others roared their approval.

The party prepared to report to the military operations center next to the hospital for assignment but Mandy stopped them.

"Mike, aren't you forgetting something?" the medic demanded.

Helmet off, he gave her a quizzical look.

"Your leg," she responded, hands on her hips. "You need to get it fixed," the petite woman stated firmly.

The Spartan tensed to counter the demand but then relaxed as he saw the compassion in her expressive dark brown eyes and felt the pain in his leg. "Okay, you're right."

"Well then I guess this is where we say goodbye," Stacker came forward and extended his hand.

Mike took it and shook it vigorously. "Thanks for pulling me out of the fire."

The ODST NCO snorted. "You more than repaid it." Then the gunnery sergeant tugged his arm to pull him aside out of ear shot of the rest. "Listen, about Misriah and the suit malfunction. I want to make sure things are square with us."

Mike patted the man on shoulder. "No hard feelings, Pete. I'd have done the same thing in your boots." The Lone Wolf was touched to see a look of relief fill the face of the battle-hardened Helljumper.

Then, taking a quick look at the waiting group, Stacker lowered his voice and said, "Listen Mike, this may not be my business but those two pretty ladies with us have you on their IFFs." The Spartan's eyes grew wide in realization at the comment as the NCO added, "and on each other's." Tread carefully."

"Thanks, gunny," Mike answered. "For everything."

The pair slapped each other on the shoulder and Stacker called out, "Okay Kilo-40, let's get over to Traxis Tower and get back into the fight!"

The remaining ODSTs surged around Mike, wishing him good hunting and then they moved out of the hospital.

When things calmed down the two UNSC Army troopers looked at Mike. "What should we do, sir?" Corporal Brown asked.

"Not likely you're going to get back to your base," Mike answered. "May as well report in to the ops center for assignment here. Plus, they might be able to let your unit know you're okay. Tali, go with them and see if you can raise Noble Team."

She hesitated, her eyes showing fear of separation.

Mike read her thoughts. "I'll be over once I get my leg sorted out and then we can go from there."

"Okay, see you in a bit," she answered with relief. Natalia turned to leave with the two troopers but then walked over to Mandy. "Good luck, thanks for everything you did out there for the team."

Mandy was touched by the genuineness of her rival. "You too. Take care."

The ONI officer departed with Brown and Shoemaker leaving Mike and Mandy alone.

The petite but feisty woman looked at him longingly so Mike opened his mouth to speak. "Mandy, Iâ€¦"

Instead of letting him talk she stretched her hand up and put it on his lips to silence him. Then swiftly she took his hand and pulled him down to her level. Not allowing him to speak or even think she immediately kissed him hard and long.

Breaking the clinch she looked at him with eyes sparkling. "I had to do that Mike, so you have no doubt how I feel about you," the woman declared.

Again Mike opened his mouth to speak but Mandy silenced him.

"You don't need to say anything," the chestnut-brown haired woman stated. "You're a special guy Mike and not because of what's been done to you. I'd like to be part of your life." She paused and took a deep breath then Mike saw how hard this was for her, that the confident exterior was a façade. Then a frown clouded her attractive face as she continued, "I know there's something going on with you and Natalia. Just know that you have other choices so if you decide to explore them, come and find me."

Mike was touched by the affection and honesty of the woman who'd suffered in many ways as much in her own life as he had. The thought drew him to her causing his stomach to churn with the turmoil. "Mandy, you deserve betterâ€¦"

The feisty woman shook her head to dismiss the comment. "Don't even go there."

Mike sighed as the turmoil grew. He rubbed his tired eyes. "You're right. I'm tornâ€¦and there's so much going on." He avoided the penetrating look of the woman but admitted, "This kind of stuff is pretty new to me." He paused, weighing his next statement. "How would I find you if I wanted to see you again?"

"You're a Spartan, you'll find a way," Mandy declared, a brilliant smile lighting up her face. "Come on, let's get that leg fixed."

Natalia was worried and hadn't wanted to leave Mike alone with the medic but she'd been sent away and had no reason to stay. She also knew things were out of her control, a sensation she'd been experiencing a lot since arriving on Reach. Once again she was struck by how sheltered her life had been.

Leaving the hospital she said nothing to the ODSTs as they parted ways, Stacker in particular she avoided. Her pride and embarrassment wouldn't allow her to say anything to them and they seemed more than

happy to part company.

But the two UNSC Army troopers were different.

"Corporal Brown, I want to thank you for your assistance the last few days," she said to the sullen soldier. "I know you got more than you bargained for and I want you to know I appreciate your help. I will be definitely reporting not only your co-operation but all you did with a recommendation for promotion."

"Thanks ma'am," the corporal responded with a nod of approval for the unexpected compliment and offer. "You take care of yourself." He began to walk away.

She turned to the remaining soldier. "Private Shoemaker," she began and then immediately knew she couldn't play this formally. "No. Josh, I don't know where to begin. You've done so much for me. I can't tell you how much that means to me."

"It was nothin', ma'am," he stated happily, "I was just glad I could do something to help." Then he looked at her with a grin and added, "Hey, and good luck with Six. I think you guys would be good together."

Natalia couldn't help but laugh in relief and embarrassment. It was that obvious. Strangely that made her feel better. Spontaneously she reached down to the shorter man and kissed him on the cheek. "If there is ever anything or my family can do to help you in the future, and I mean ever, you ask. I could never begin to repay everything you've done for me."

The Army trooper seemed happy with the offer. "I might just take you up on that ma'am." He straightened up, saluted her and trotted away to catch up to his colleague.

Happy with how things ended with the soldiers, Natalia reported into the ops center to get an update. The woman was still nervous having to leave Mike alone with Mandy. Her fate was in the hands of the divine. Yet again this was another new sensation for her and she began to wonder just who really was in control of their destiny. While the name 'Misriah' had given her privilege and opportunity ultimately it was a bit of a façade that she'd hidden behind. Since the discovery of the Covenant invasion of Reach the name had meant nothing and she'd been required to stand on her own ability. Yet despite the vulnerability and perhaps perceived limitations from afar she'd never felt more alive. It was an interesting dichotomy the proud woman pondered. And now yet again she was in a position of vulnerability with Mike being alone with Mandy. She knew the attractive medic had feelings for Mike, it was pretty obvious. Yet the two of them had experienced a special moment recently that had to mean something. Would it be enough or would she lose in the end? Despite desperately not wanting that to happen she would trust the same divine that it would work out for her in the end. No more scheming or manipulating. No more Stinger. She'd be simply Natalia and would stand on that.

Knowing she had some time to kill before Mike would be healed Natalia checked and found out that Noble Team in fact was still alive and in New Alexandria helping with the defense. She tried to reach them but communications were still spotty and numerous special ops units like

Noble had gone silent in order to be more effective. Natalia found out as well that the city had been under siege for nearly a week but ultimately the Covenant push had been too much and so the civilian authorities had turned control of the metropolitan area over to the military who were organizing an evacuation of all the citizens.

Three hours later Natalia saw Mike walking towards her without a limp and alone. Her heart soared as the result of both.

"What's up?" Mike asked. Helmet on, it was hard as she looked into his mirrored visor what he meant by the question. Had her face shown anxiety? Did she seem glad he was alone?

"What do you mean?" Natalia stammered in return. Wow, that was smooth, she chided herself. When am I going to stop acting like a dumb school girl around him?

Mike shook his head as if confused by the response so clarified, "What's the situation here?"

"Oh, sorry. Noble is in Reach but I can't contact them. Either they've gone dark or the Covvies are blocking comms. The overall mission is to support the general evac of the civilian population that's started," she reported.

Mike looked down for a moment, as if thinking. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yea, fine," Natalia lied. "How's your leg?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Good to go," the Spartan responded confidently. "Mandy got me sorted out."

"I'm glad. Where's she now?"

"She's staying with the hospital's triage unit. A lot of casualties are coming in. They need her skills there."

Natalia nodded her head but said nothing, unsure that she'd be able to keep her swirling emotions in check.

Mike paused, looking at the woman. Without saying anything he took her by the hand and led her to a bench nearby where they sat down. Taking off his helmet he stared intensely at Natalia with his slate grey eyes. Despite the tingle of the kiss he'd just experienced and the turmoil within him Mike knew he had some things to say to Natalia. "I know things have gotten tense between us because of her."

"Mike, I—" she began

He held his hand up to stop her. "I saw how you hesitated when Mandy was at risk in that firefight"

"Wait!" she interrupted.

"But I also saw how you saved her life even though she didn't know it and you thought no one saw," he continued uninterrupted.

Natalia looked away, her face burning red with embarrassment at her hesitation being exposed. _Mike must hate me_, she thought. _How could I be so weak? _the proud woman lamented.

Instead of condemning her, Mike took her hand and gently lifted her chin to look at him. "Tali, I can't tell you how much that meant to see that." His eyes got glassy and he swallowed hard. "Like I've said, this is all new to me. If only we could get away from all thisâ€¦maybe I could sort my feelings outâ€¦maybe weâ€¦|.", he let the unfinished sentence hang in the air as Natalia's heart hung on a thread. "You've shown me something, opened doors that I never thought I'd experience. I'm glad you came to Reach and I'm glad we're together in this."

Mike paused and considered again his interactions and feelings for Mandy. They were there; it was unmistakable and only made things more complicated. Still, he had stronger feelings in another direction. It was time to take another step. "And when this is all over, maybeâ€¦|." Again he let the words hang, unsaid, but Natalia could fill in the gaps and her heart soared, filled with an elation she'd never known.

Tell her! Mike screamed at himself in his mind. _Tell her you love her! But do you love Mandy? I don't know! Aahhh!_ His tormented mind slammed back and forth in torment but still, he was glad for the feelings. It was good to experience something other than rage. He'd let things unfold and take them as they came. For now he allowed himself to stare at the gorgeous woman looking longingly at him only inches away and knew he was more than a lone wolf or a killing machine. He was a man.

Mike took Natalia's gloved hand in his, raised it to his lips and kissed it. Then standing up the Spartan slapped a mag into his newly acquired assault rifle, declaring, "Come on Tali, we'll lend a hand here until we can connect with the team."

'We'. Natalia liked the sound of that. They were back together again. Her hand tingled despite the fact the man's lips had not connected with her flesh. It didn't matter. She felt it anyway. With a heart filling with joy, the woman gladly followed the man she loved back into harm's way.

28. Chapter 28

****Chapter 28****

****August 23, 0719 Hours, New Alexandria, Eposz****

Mike and Natalia worked throughout the remainder of the day and into the night as an independent fire team, pausing for several hours of sleep taken in watches. The focal point of their efforts had been the area surrounding Traxus Tower, a tall, gray, narrow spire that dominated the landscape of the sprawling city. The building, which had its own launch pads, had become the key area of extraction for the civilian population that had started the previous day. As a result the Covenant had been pressing the area hard trying to penetrate in while the beleaguered UNSC forces reinforced it to allow the citizens of the city a flight to safety.

Waves of Grunts had been thrown at the defensive cordon but thus far the human defenders had been able to hold. Groups of Jackals then began to probe and snipe from the surrounding buildings but again the integrity of the civilian collection and evacuation point held.

Despite the recent tension over Mandy and the distraction of the ODS team Mike and Natalia once again worked well together. The seasoned Spartan used his experience and IFF to assess areas of need so moved freely about the safe zone with Natalia in his wake covering his flanks.

Early in the morning and already on the offensive, they pair had gone into a basement of a building adjoining the complex to clear out of a group of Suicide Grunts attempting to sneak through the lower areas. Easily dispatching the squad they'd caught by surprise the area channel on their comms came to life.

"This is Evac Team 7," a harried trooper called out using the call sign of one of the dedicated Army units tasked with assisting the civilian evacuation, "calling all stations. We need immediate assistance in the Traxus southeast court yard, over." The sound of intensifying weapon's fire could be heard through the channel. "We are in an imminent threat situation. Require assistance from any who can assist, over."

Mike tagged the location of the harried group and set a waypoint. "Come on Tali, sounds like they need our help," he ordered, slapping a fresh mag into his assault rifle.

Quickly finding their way to a set of stairs the pair sprinted up into the morning sunlight coming out onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard. A Covenant Spirit dropship was already hovering over the courtyard disgorging its contents out of the troop bay. Massive, shaggy creatures were dropping out and aggressively attacking the soldiers and civilians caught in the area.

Natalia stopped involuntarily at the intimidating creatures. Standing around nine feet tall, the dark grey, shaggy, hulking creatures had an ape-like appearance. Though at likely close to 1,500 pounds they were far more fearsome. "What are those things?" she breathed out in shock.

"Jiralhanae," Mike responded, checking his stock of grenades. "They're called Brutes. Come on, let's go."

Every fiber of Natalia's body wanted to go in the opposite direction as dozens of the monstrous creatures dropped into the fray but she moved automatically with Mike. Though fear gripped her the woman was determined to not fail Mike or those in need.

Moving down a set of stairs to engage the dangerous threat they passed several panicked civilians fleeing the scene.

"Help! Somebody help us!" a terrified twenty-something woman called out.

"They're coming! They're after us!" a balding man in a ripped business suit screamed as he pushed past the woman.

"Stay calm, move clear of the area," Natalia called as they passed, following Mike towards a group of Army troopers trying to rally.

The pair laid down some cover fire from long range as the Brutes began to organize themselves for a push in the direction of Traxus Tower allowing the civilians to run away from the scene of the growing battle.

A group of Army troopers were forming in the courtyard so Mike and Natalia joined them.

"You Evac Team 7?" Mike asked the group, receiving a nod of affirmation. "Who's in charge here?"

"Sergeant Bellbrook," a trooper with the name Jonas on his assault vest responded pointing to another group of soldiers trying to hold a defensive position.

"All right specialist, let's link up and start to push back," Mike ordered.

"Come on! Let's go!" the lead trooper called out to his fire team.

"What are those things?!" another soldier asked near panic.

"Brutes!" the first one responded tersely. "Move to cover!"

The aggressive attackers had moved off towards the tower, not seeming to be interested in the broken human cordon, allowing the scattered UNSC troops to regroup.

Going up to an NCO the trooper reported, "Picked up some friendlies."

"You Bellbrook?" Mike asked.

The Sergeant nodded but was looking at the unfolding battle that wasn't going well for the defenders.

"I'm Noble Six, this is Noble Seven," Mike gestured towards Natalia who stood just to his rear. "What's the sitrep?"

"We were holding okay but Brutes dropped right into the center of our line and everything fell into the crapper."

"A Spartan? Where the hell did he come from?" another trooper interjected into the conversation who'd been covering the approach.

"Who cares?" Bellbrook retorted. Spartan, assist!"

"That's what we're here for," Mike answered, doing a quick assessment on his IFF.

"Evac Team 7 to Kilo 26, we have eyes on Traxus Tower." Sergeant Bellbrook reported now that his group had rallied after the initial setback and with bolstered confidence being supported by the

Spartan.

"Copy, Evac Team 7," the operations communicator affirmed. "Move to assist the evac."

"How do you want to play this?" the sergeant asked deferring to not only Mike's rank but experience.

"Right up the gut," the Spartan responded grimly. "We go in hard and fast, don't let them get formed. I'll lead the way. Tali, cover my angles. The rest of you arrowhead formation off my wake. Let's roll!"

"With a yell the human defenders waded back into the battle.

Moving through a shadowed area under an elevated walkway the humans surged into what had likely once been a small gardened courtyard which would have been a nice spot for a lunch break in happier days. But now plasma burns, blood and destruction marred the beauty of the spot. The Brute attackers had been forming up to push into the Traxus Tower complex allowing the advancing UNSC troops to get in close.

Mike didn't break stride. Charging in he led with a frag grenade which landed in the center of a trio of Brutes. One caught the brunt of the charge but the other two howled in anger turning to the new threat. The Spartan unleashed a deadly stream of fire from his assault rifle as he moved around the attackers who turned and attempted to return fire with their Spike Rifles. Several of the super-heated spikes connected but Mike's armor handled it easily. Assault rifle empty, in one motion the Spartan picked up one of the fallen Spikers and used it to unleash a salvo on another roaring Brute bulling in. The spikes exploded into the chest of the hulking beast causing it to drop to its knees in an ear-splitting roar.

Two other Brutes joined the fray but between Natalia and the half-dozen Army troopers they were able to take the Jiralhanae with concentrated fire and grenades. Thinking they were safe the troopers let up until one in the lead's head exploded as three spikes hit him in quick succession.

"More, topside!" Bellbrook yelled as the others ducked for cover.

Mike moved fast. Leaving Natalia in his wake he reloaded his assault rifle on the run. Taking the stairs four at a time assisted by his MJOLNIR armor he quickly got to the upper level where two more Brutes were sniping. The pair turned too late as Mike emptied a full clip of armor-piercing ammo into the shaggy beast that went down in a crumpled heap. The Spartan kept up his charge, smashing the butt of his rifle into the snout of the ape-like creature who tried to bring his weapon to bear. Bashing hard he caught the Brute off balance who tumbled over the side to the cut-stone courtyard. Before it could get up the other members of Evac 7 surrounded the beast and cut it down.

Mike took a quick look around and saw there were no more attackers in the courtyard area. He waved to Bellbrook to let him know then jumped down in one motion.

"Clear, we're all clear!" Sergeant Bellbrook called out.

"How do we get to the tower?" a female trooper named Foxglove called out.

The senior NCO looked at a schematic of the area. "Elevator in the atrium goes down to the cargo port. Cargo port goes to the tower." He then looked at Mike for affirmation.

"Looks good to me. Reload and move out," the Spartan replied assessing the situation. They had lost one trooper dead and one too badly wounded to carry on but they needed to press on.

Mike set a waypoint to an opening into the atrium area. Looking over at Natalia he asked, "You good?"

"She nodded her head vigorously in agreement.

"Okay. Stay on my butt," Mike ordered. "We're going to move fast. We got to root these Brutes out before they overrun the evac area."

"I'm with you Mike," she affirmed.

The human party moved quickly down a flight of stone stairs to the opening in the low lying structure heading into the soaring tower which was only about 100 meters away with Noble Six once again in the lead. As they were about to move inside a trio of Brutes slid out of the shadows into the morning sunlight to block the way. They laid down a hot fire from their Spikers checking the progress of the UNSC forces.

"Got to get in there!" Private Foxglove called out in frustration.

"Contacts, to the west!" Specialist Jonas added urgently.

With other Brutes coming to support their comrades it was imperative the humans were able to move into the atrium area. So Mike tossed two grenades in succession and then opened fire with his assault rifle while Natalia and the others joined in the chorus, shredding the Brutes blocking the way.

"Okay. Let's move in, and find that elevator," Bellbrook ordered.

Entering into the atrium they fanned out to not present a concentrated target with Mike anchoring the center of their line. This time the Brutes were supported by Skirmishers who tried to pick off the human forces successfully dropping one trooper and wounding another. But momentum was on the side of the UNSC forces and they were able to push through the Jiralhanae screen picking several other Army troopers along the way. Free of Brutes for the moment the remaining Covenant forces consisted of Grunts and Skirmishers. Though they would not have proved as difficult an opponent there were numerous civilians that had been caught up in the tide when the atrium had been overrun.

With surgical precision Mike mowed down the attackers freeing the vulnerable civilians. "Tali, co-ord a collection point for the

civvies," he ordered. "You protect it personally with two troopers. Bellbrook, you and the rest of your team with me. We'll clear the atrium."

Natalia knew not to question Mike's order though several of the soldiers made note that the ONI officer outranked the man. Then again, who was going to argue with a Spartan? The woman knew though this was no indication of him wanting to get rid of her. On the contrary, the Spartan trusted her to protect the vulnerable residents from harm since the area was still far from secure. "Roger that, I've got the civilians," she confirmed.

Charging down a set of stairs Mike began to clear out the lower level then kept moving up another set to a new level. He trusted that the few Covenant remaining in his wake would be taken care of by the Army troopers. His IFF was alive with non-combatants marked in green so he desperately kept pushing to save as many as he could. Rushing up another flight of steps he shredded four Grunts trying to hold the position. One of their methane tanks detached and shot crazily through the air like a rocket leaving a yellow contrail behind it. The Unggoy panicked at the aggressive assault from the Spartan so scattered shrieking all the way.

Continuing to press through the building Mike and the others moved into the naturally lit main atrium area. The overhead glass panels allowed the sunlight of what looked like a beautiful sunny day to stream in.

But there was no time to enjoy it.

Here there looked to be a new clan of Brutes systematically killing a group of civilians who'd been caught moving to the evac point. There were a number of dead UNSC troopers who had fallen trying to protect the citizens of the city. One soldier screamed as two Brutes tried to rip his arms out of their sockets for sport.

Mike let loose a primal yell and charged into the fray, dropping one of the tormenters with a dozen rounds in the snout. He kept moving and shoulder butted the other knocking the Jiralhanae to the floor. The Spartan then turned to hose down the others in the area. But the remainder of the clan responded with a deadly salvo of superheated spikes from their Spikers that impacted on Mike's armor draining his shield, causing the alarm claxon to go off. He had to move out of the way to allow a recharge but Pte. Foxglove wasn't paying attention. Without the Spartan protecting her, the lead UNSC trooper took a salvo and went down screaming.

The Spartan's armor reset so he returned to the fray tossing a grenade into the three Brutes concentrating to counterattack. The explosion allowed the UNSC forces to regain the initiative and clear the glass-enclosed structure.

Outpacing the other soldiers, Mike charged up another set of stairs and ran smack into a group of Jackals sprinting to join the fight. He bowled the first one over before it could snap its energy shield on and stove in the avian creatures face with his heavily armored boots. The remainder brought their shields to bear and began to fire but Mike bulled through them and one-by-one took them out at close quarters.

Then, almost seemingly impossible, the atrium area fell silent.

"Clear!" Sergeant Bellbrook reported, as the remnant of Evac Team 7 confirmed all the Covenant attackers that had penetrated the cordon were dead. The cost had been high, nearly three quarters of the team and those they'd picked up along the way were down but at least they made it to the elevator and could truly begin to assist with the evacuation.

Mike moved to the doors of the elevator and pressed the activation button.

Nothing happened.

"What the hell is taking this thing so long?" Specialist Jonas, who had miraculously survived the whole battle so far, exclaimed nervously.

Mike opened a comms channel to the central command. "Kilo 26 this is Noble Six. We have secured the atrium elevator. We have a group of civilians here and the remnants of Evac Team 7. What's the sitrep on the elevator, over?"

A familiar voice cut in on the channel. "Uh, we're evacuating a group of civilians on the floor below you. Soon as they reach the cargo port, I'll send the elevator back up."

"Pete, is that you?" Mike asked, hearing the familiar voice of Gunnery Sergeant Stacker.

"Yea Mike," the ODST NCO responded. "Looks like we're working together again. Listen, if you can hold that position it'll buy us time to get these people out."

"Roger that, we'll hold the line," Mike answered.

"Dropships! They're pulling into the courtyard, watch your flanks!" Sergeant Bellbrook called out. "Okay, everyone find some cover, stay sharp. We need to hold this position."

Mike moved through a large archway into a new open green space in the sprawling office complex and watched another Spirit dropping a mixed group of Grunts and Brutes to try to regain the atrium. Checking his ammo the Spartan could see he was low on assault rifle rounds so grabbed a Spike Rifle and several clips from a dead Brute.

Knowing the archway was vulnerable and with civilians and wounded UNSC troops gathered near the elevator he knew they had to keep the Covenant forces out of that area so he moved out into the open and engaged the attackers before they could get organized. Initially the aggressive foray by the Spartan supported by fire from the opening kept the Covenant attackers at bay.

But then a new threat arrived.

Several larger Brutes, who appeared to be officers or even chieftains, arrived on the scene. Each carried a long pole arm weapon that looked like a war hammer. While one end has a sharp-looking blade the opposite side of the head was mounted with some form of

narrow box. With a roar the lead Brute brought the head down onto the ground and a massive shock wave of displaced gravity knocked Mike off balance and sent two UNSC troopers tumbling. Another blast caught Mike trying to right himself and he was knocked over in addition to the remaining guards on the archway allowing the remaining Covenant to steam into the opening.

A general melee ensued with civilians running away screaming and wounded UNSC troopers trying to defend themselves. Mike regained his feet and grabbed one of the Gravity Hammers before it could be slammed onto him by a charging Brute trying to take him out. He wrestled with the burly Jiralhanae for control twisting the staff around to slam the ape-like creature in the face. Then with his heavily-booted foot he kicked the creature in what he assumed was its groin. He was correct. The Brute grunted in pain and doubled over allowing Mike to wrestle the Gravity Hammer away. With a vicious chop down with the razor sharp Tungsten-alloy blade he nearly severed the head of the burly creature causing it to flop to the deck spasming.

Holding onto the Gravity Hammer Mike ran over to a concentration of Covenant forces and slammed it down to the ground. A satisfying shock wave sent Grunts flying through the air and two Brutes tumbling. With Mike wielding this new weapon effectively the human defenders were able to secure the area of the atrium housing the elevator and again things went quiet.

Mike hefted the Gravity Hammer with a sense of satisfaction then in a moment of panic he thought of Natalia. Dropping the Brute weapon he looked around wildly for the distinctive red MJOLNIR armor then calmed down when he saw her leading a group of civilians towards the elevator. She waved to him from across the room to his great relief. Stooping down to pick up his Assault Rifle one of the remaining troopers from Evac Team 7 couldn't help but exclaim, "Damn, Lieutenant... Glad you're on our side. The elevator should now get us to the tower."

Mike snorted but said nothing, the relief he felt that Natalia was okay giving him pause for thought, as the elevator door opened and a squad of ODS'T emerged to provide a covering force for the transportation device.

"Sir, they want to see you down below, ASAP," the NCO in charge of the relief force reported to Mike.

Entering in with as many civilians as could be fit, the glass doors slid closed smoothly in the poshly appointed elevator and just like that, the war stopped for them for a few minutes.

"Going down. Cargo port in Traxus Tower." The elevator's computer voice announced calmly, blissfully unaware of the destruction all around it.

"If you're tryin' to get to the tower you're too late lieutenant," Gunny Stacker reported to Mike over the comms as he waited for the elevator to stop. "Corvette over the starport pounded the hell out of the place. Cargo port is impassable on foot, rooftop evac's a wash. We could use the executive landing pad 'cept there's no easy way to get there. A group of ODS'T specialists are working on a plan, they might appreciate some backup."

The elevator stopped at the bottom and the doors on the opposite side opened. Mike walked out and was greeted by an Army trooper guarding the exit.

"On the other side of the hall there, lieutenant," the young soldier pointed. "Right through the Triage."

Mike walked briskly past a group of wounded civilians and out the door onto a deck. He saw a group of ODSTs attempting to clear the skies with anti-air fire. He also recognized several members of Stacker's Kilo 4-0 team.

"There he is. That's the one they're talking about," one of the operators he recognized exclaimed, shaking the Spartan's hand.

"Radio's buzzing about you, Spartan," another joined in, slapping Mike on the back. Then looking at a group from their team strapping into jetpacks asked, "You feel like jumping?"

"If you think it'll help," Mike said, "sure. I'll attach to you guys for the time being."

Gunny Stacker strode over. Though he had bandages on his arm and leg he still had the confident swagger of an ODST. "Damn, it's good to see you son," the man exclaimed in his southern drawl.

"You too Pete," Mike responded warmly, shaking the man's hand. "What's going on?"

The ODST NCO updated him on the situation at the evacuation point and the plan to try to establish a new perimeter in order to continue moving the civilians off planet. By that point Natalia joined them in the area. Though Stacker nodded to her politely he didn't address her.

"We're gonna capture the landing pad on the executive wing so the evac birds can land," Stacker explained. "The boys could use your help takin' that point if you want to jump with them."

"Sure, why not?" Mike agreed.

"We got an extra Jetpack, Go ahead, try it on Spartan," one of the operators declared enthusiastically.

Mike grabbed the propulsion device from its housing in the makeshift armory and noticed Natalia moving to join him. "Stay her Tali and work with Stacker on holding the strong point," he said to her.

"But Mike, I want to go with you," Natalia protested with a note of urgency.

He shook his head in disagreement. "I doubt you're rated for these things. They're tricky." Mike felt the intense disappointment and note of fear in the woman at their separation. "Listen, when we jump off this point is going to become vulnerable. Protect the wounded. I'm counting on you. And I'll be back soon, promise." He couldn't believe he'd added that last part. With everything falling apart around it was hard for him to make such a pledge but he could see the

relief in the passionate woman's eyes at the comment.

"Okay Mike, you can count on me," Natalia affirmed, with a look of resolution. "Just come back, please." Spontaneously she gave him a hug despite their bulky armor then checking the ammo count on her assault rifle she walked off to check in with Gunnery Sergeant Stacker.

Mike paused to watch her go, feeling a sudden tinge of loneliness. The Lone Wolf had never felt that before, he'd never cared enough. But now he did. He cared about Natalia, he cared about Noble Team who was operating in another part of the city, and he cared what happened to Reach.

And then he realized, like a long forgotten door being opened, he cared about his family too.

For so long he'd been trying to live down the legacy of his heritage, and the pain of the death of his family that he'd kept people at arms-length. As he began to strap into the jetpack he looked over the sprawling city under attack. Buildings burned in the distance and the sound of battle was everywhere on the air. He'd tried hard over the years to not think of his namesake Mike Nantz, his distant great grandfather but watching the city under siege he couldn't help but wonder if the man had stood watching Los Angeles burn the same way back in the 21st century under an alien attack and felt like he did. Mike admitted he'd worked hard to shun the legacy of his past but perhaps it was time to start to learn from it instead, thinking of the faded and tarnished medal sitting in his utility pouch along with Jorge's dog tags.

"You ready to go, Six?" Corporal Chin walked up to him, strapped into a jetpack as well.

"Yea, let's do this," Mike responded, checking the harness to make sure it was secure.

"All right, let me introduce you to the others," the Asian ODS'T responded with a grim smile.

The pair walked over to another group of ODS'Ts waiting to go. They were checking each other's gear and prepping their weapons.

"Guys, this is Noble Six," Chin called out. The others turned and gave an approving nod. A sergeant came over, checked to make sure his gear was set up and declared, "Welcome to the Bullfrogs." Then calling out to the others yelled, "Other side, on my mark! 3, 2, 1 - jump!"

29. Chapter 29

****Chapter 29****

****August 23, 1047 Hours, New Alexandria, Eposz****

Mike flipped the switch to turn on the jet pack then thumbed the thrusters. With a whoosh the Spartan shot into the air following the ODS'Ts despite the half ton of armor and his own weight. He and the others made a series of leap frog moves from one platform or

observation tower to another moving in the shadows closer to their objective. Though he'd not used a jet pack for several years Mike quickly got the feel again of the thrust and ease-off method needed for the precise jumps they were making. The sensation of flying through the air was exhilarating. Despite his MJOLNIR armor instantly compensating for the changes in gravity he still felt the thrill.

"Look sharp Bullfrogs," the ODST sergeant leading the assault called out to the team over the comms. "We're near the port. We secure this point then take our objective at the tower."

Landing on a jutting platform Mike and the others dashed through the all metal gray structure that seemed to be some sort of mechanical bay. Moving quickly through they caught a group of Grunts on overwatch off guard. The Unggoy panicked as the UNSC forces flooded out of a spot they hadn't expected. Mike shredded a pair with sustained fire from his assault rifle while the rest of the team cleared out the remainder of the blocking force.

Covenant troops rallied and flooded into the area to stop the UNSC attempt to take the area. Plasma fire lanced through the air from a group of Jackals on a higher warehouse area. Mike charged up a set of wide metal stairs, absorbing Plasma Rifle fire as the other ODSTs traveled in his wake. Reaching the next objective he tossed a frag grenade into mass of Covenant surging into the area then turned on a trio of Jackals holding the stairs. He dropped one who was sniping at the last of the ODSTs coming up the stairs then turned to the next who snapped its Energy Shield into place. The armor-piercing rounds bounded off harmlessly but off guard the avian creature was helpless when Mike plowed into it. The Kig-Yar slammed into the wall behind it with a sickening thud. The Spartan drove his knee up into the pinned creature's groin while simultaneously cross checking it with his leveled Assault Rifle. Mike heard a satisfying _snap_ as the Jackal's back broke. Momentum established, the remainder of the Kig-Yar were dispatched by the ODSTs.

Before they could move on, with an enraged roar a group of Brutes charged into the warehouse area to stop the human assault. Mike deftly switched from his Assault Rifle to the M45 Tactical Shotgun he'd carried for this contingency knowing it would be more effective in close quarters. The Spartan kept ducking and weaving in and out of the various containers to not provide a static target while the Jiralhanae peppered the area with Brute Shot rounds. More of the hulking creatures poured into the room so while Mike took out two through his efforts the rest of the ODST's were checked. The Brute fire was so hot they actually started to push the humans back towards the stairs out of the hangar of the port.

"We need to consolidate our fire," Mike called out to the ODST NCO, "or we're going to get pushed off this platform."

"Roger that, Spartan," the sergeant responded grimly, slapping a fresh mag into his Assault Rifle. "Options?"

"Brutes are bull rushers," the experienced Spartan commented dropping a charging Jiralhanae with three quick rounds from his shotgun. "We draw them in and use their momentum to push through. You rally here and I'll take Cpl. Chin and another and slide to the right flank, open a lane and we surge through."

"Copy. Let's do it."

The ODS Ts responded quickly to the commands of their squad leader while Mike shifted his team into position all the time adjusting to the movement of the aggressive Brutes.

In position, the click of two green lights signaled time to move. The ODS Ts and Mike immediately turned from their withdrawal and with a salvo of grenades began to push back. The concentration of fire worked as the charging Brutes were caught off guard and their momentum carried them into the deadly hail of armor piercing rounds.

The strategy worked and the UNSC team was able to then push on through the port warehouse easily punching through the remaining Grunts left to hold the position. Compounding the problem for the behemoths, a Suicide Grunt came waddling into the fray screaming incoherently. Mike caught the opportunity and dropped the Unggoy with a burst of fire. The squat bodied creature fell in the middle of a group of Brutes and the primed grenades went off causing carnage as they tried to rally. The UNSC forces now had the momentum and so working together they systematically eliminated the remaining threats.

"Area secure!" one of the operators called out in relief.

With the port clear they were now able to make the short jump to Traxus Tower for the final push. Their losses had been surprisingly light considering the fierce combat they'd gone through to get to this point.

The ODS T NCO in charged reorganized his group then said to Mike, "Head up to the roof level, Spartan."

Mike dropped a pesky Jackal trying to sneak up for a shot with a sustained burst of fire from his assault rifle then turned to the ODS T NCO. "Listen, the call signs Noble Six and the names Mike, how about we move past the formalities," he declared to the sergeant.

The grizzled veteran grinned. "Got it, Six. Nice shooting. Now let's take this tower and get these civvies the hell off this planet." Looking around the NCO got his bearings and called out, "There's the pad, get to that tower."

Starting to move though a pleasantly designed atrium area the multi-level structure turned out to be a bit of a box.

"Other side, other side!" the lead ODS T called out urgently. "Entrance is on the other side!"

They'd misjudged the entry point to the tower's landing area so had to fight through a screen of Jackals and Grunts to get there. Still, the human attack from this quarter seemed to have been unanticipated so any attempts to block them were piecemeal at best. As the fire intensified, Mike moved to the forefront, becoming the point of the spear. Absorbing Covenant plasma fire so the more lightly-armored ODS Ts could concentrate on fire support they punched through the area to where they needed to be.

Traveling out of the interior of the building the group moved out to a concourse level. The sun had broken through the clouds, lighting up the now battle-scarred area. The sight of combat to his left got Mike's attention and he saw a group of UNSC Army troopers along with a group of civilians fighting for their lives. Mike figured they must have been overrun when the Covenant had taken over the Traxus Tower area so decided to wade in and assist.

A beleaguered Army Specialist saw the armored Spartan coming and called out for assistance. Clearing the Covenant forces pressing into the sitting area they'd been holed up in the Spartan was pleased to see they had a store of ammo; that being the only reason they'd held on as long as they did. Grabbing grenades, shotgun shells and assault rifle clips he moved through the destroyed door and onto the exposed walkway. Moving past evergreen trees and planters adding color to the metallic gray area he ran into a squad of Grunts reforming to attack. Leading with a grenade he pushed through and kept moving, knowing he'd bought the civilians some time but also conscious the mission clock was running.

Traveling quickly along the exterior walkway towards a series of stairs leading to the upper level his IFF lit up anew bright red like Christmas showing him the Covenant forcers were rallying. Using the lull to reload his weapons Mike continued to press on conscious that only half the original ODSST team was with him. Doing a quick check on his team status he noticed the name 'Chin' was not among them. Though he'd only known the ODSST corporal a few days he hoped the Asian operator was okay. This starting to care for people was becoming a distraction for him.

"Concentrate Mike," he snarled to himself as Jackals came in to block his way on the narrow walkway. Shields locked, they lay down a hot stream of plasma fire starting to drain his own shield. Mike reflexively tossed a grenade to buy time as the avian creatures ducked behind their shields as he went to cover behind a pillar so his defense could regenerate. At full strength he sprinted forward bashing through the locked shields with his shoulder, battering the Jackals all around him.

Mike continued to move upwards, fighting his way up one set of stairs after another but finally nearly reaching the summit. Here though he began to encounter armored Brutes wielding deadly Gravity Hammers.

This proved tricky for the Spartan because besides the Brutes there was still a large contingent of Grunts and Jackals. So while the weaker fighters engaged him it allowed the Brutes to wade in and seek to exploit any opportunity. It seemed the hulking beasts were more intelligent than they looked and had learned from their initial contact with the deadly Spartan adjusting their tactics.

A massive swing from one of the Gravity Hammers clipped Mike sending him sprawling. The ODSSTs with him were fully engaged so he was on his own. Deftly jumping to his feet despite the bulky armor he charged into the hammer-wielding Brute first shoulder bashing it then firing a shotgun round at point-blank range. Then he stepped back, bashed it in the snout with the butt end of his shotgun while reloading and then firing again. The third time he did this the enraged beast screamed and dropped to the metal deck.

While this new threat was dangerous a positive result of the human assault force's efforts was that they'd opened the door for UNSC troops from below to assist them. Two new squads of ODSTs surged into the fight adding much-needed firepower.

Continuing to push up, the landing area was finally in sight though what greeted them wasn't encouraging. Several heavily armored Brute Chieftains commanded a large contingent of Covenant infantry. In addition, two Shade Anti-infantry turrets had been dropped into place to provide support.

"Clear that pad, Six!" the Bullfrog's sergeant called out.

As Mike began to move up the last flight of steps a Brute holding a higher position shot some form of grenade at him. It exploded and blew him off his feet. Crashing into the ODSTs behind him he got up quickly and moved behind a series of decorative pillars and concrete blocks to a flanking position on the Brute wielding the deadly weapon. It let off another round taking out three ODSTs but allowing Mike to surge in and with a combination of shotgun fire and bashing away was able to drop it. He picked up what turned out to be a Brute Shot grenade launcher along with several 6-round magazines and continued on. Using the Jiralhanae weapon against them he used it to blast several more and eliminate one of the Shades.

Still, there were plenty of Covenant troops and another turret to deal with. Using a combination of Assault Rifle fire and Brute Shot grenades Mike moved fluidly in a dance of death going inside the richly-appointed lounge of the executive landing pad and outside onto a walkway. By this point all the ODSTs with him had either been hit or peeled off in a number of mini-battles going on for the control of the critical extraction point.

Mike had been busy dealing with a mixed group of Grunts and Jackals that had entered the fray and couldn't stop yet another armored Brute Chieftain from getting close. With a primal scream it drove its Gravity Hammer towards Mike. Though the Spartan was able to duck out of the way the impact beside him sent a gravity shock wave that knocked him against a wall like a rag doll. The Brute charged in, smashing him in the chest with the Tungsten-Alloy blade then following up with a head butt into the helmet. Mike's alarm claxon went off to warn him his shield level was low. He began to grapple with the beast but the Jiralhanae was strong. Another terrific smash from the blade and pain lanced through his body from a cracked rib since his shield hadn't regenerated. He'd dropped the Brute Shot and the Assault Rifle had flown away so he desperately tried to reach for his combat knife.

The Brute though knew he had him and yelled triumphantly, spittle from the beast's mouth flying all over Mike's visor. Then from behind a hail of Assault Rifle fire caused the Brute to grimace and then with a look of shock fall to the ground in a death scream.

Mike looked and saw Corporal Chin standing two feet behind the dead Brute, Assault Rifle still smoking.

"Thought we lost you," Mike said with a note of relief, but noticed the Asian ODST bleeding from a shoulder wound.

"Naw," Chin replied, "just needed a breather before I pulled your butt out of the fire."

Mike snorted. "Glad you didn't wait too long. Let's reform and clear this pad."

With Mike in the lead, Brute Shot peppering any Covenant concentration and a growing number of ODSTs in short order the UNSC forces were able to finally secure the landing pad.

The commander of the ODSTs that had fought their way through the building came out to the open area and assessed the situation. Though he didn't say anything he patted Mike on the shoulder then reported, "Yankee Niner to Echo Dispatch: landing pad is clear, send in the evac birds."

"Copy, Yankee Niner. Birds away."

Mike stood and watched Pelicans move on station to prepare to pull people out and a group of Falcons join them to provide cover.

Miraculously, the Sergeant commanding the Bullfrog contingent had made it. Despite two wounds he painfully limped up and wryly said, "Pleasure jumping with you, Spartan."

Mike laughed despite the pain of his own cracked rib at the jibe. "Yea, you to sergeant."

Clapping Mike on the shoulder, the operator chuckled as well. "Come on Mike, let's get regrouped and patched up." Walking over to a hovering Falcon the combat veteran added, "And if we get out of this alive, I'm going to buy you a beer."

The simple statement of one warrior to another really struck Mike and he thought about it all the way along the short hop back to their staging area. He'd been young when he'd joined up and then had spent much of his career alone. The simple camaraderie between combat soldiers had been unfamiliar to him but sitting beside those who had survived he realized they shared a common bond- they were brothers-in-arms.

Returning, a medic checked him out and gave him a shot for his ribs, and then with a bit of downtime he replaced the jetpack on a rack and loaded up on ammo and grenades. The Spartan had a renewed awareness of a growing mental and physical fatigue piggy backing on a growing fatalism towards their chances of winning this fight. His leg still hurt despite the treatment he'd received. Though the break had been fixed and he could function it still ached. He turned from the makeshift depot and saw Natalia coming over to join him. The independent man had a mixed feeling of joy and relief which caused him to pause and watch her come towards him.

"How'd it go?" she asked, obvious relief on her own face at his return.

"We cleared the pad and we're able to resume the extractions but they put up a fight," Mike responded, rolling his shoulders to try to work out the stiffness he became aware of from carrying the jetpack now that the adrenaline had stopped surging.

"I'm glad. Many losses?" she asked.

"A few. More than I would have liked," he responded, avoiding eye contact. "How about you? How were things here?"

"Well, they pressed us hard a couple of times. Those Brutes just don't stop," Natalia responded with a noticeable shudder. "I thought the Elites were bad but those thingsâ€¦ anyway, we had a good position and good fire support so we held okay."

Mike looked at the woman and thought back to their first experience in combat together. He remembered the spoiled, privileged woman in over her head and nowâ€¦ his attitude had changed as he saw character coming out. She was still scared, and was allowing it to show. She still had lots to learn, but she was learning and that impressed him. Pondering the thought but aware of an overwhelming hunger Mike said, "Come on, lets grab some food while we get the chance."

Finding some ration packs the pair sat down on some empty ammo crates away from the flow. The Covenant had pulled back to regroup so the action had slowed down allowing for a rest.

Natalia chewed a mouthful of food but it was obvious her mind was working through something. "Why are they working so hard to get into this area?" she finally asked, a puzzled look on her expressive face.

Mike said nothing in reply, just looking at her curiously, savoring his own ration pack.

"I mean, there's no tactical value to the place," the woman continued. "Why pay the cost to take it?"

"You really don't get it, do you?" Mike asked in surprise.

"Why? What do you mean?" the feisty ONI officer responded aggressively at the tone of the question.

"Because it's full of civvies," Mike answered patiently, trying to allow for the woman's obvious naivetÃ©.

"So?"

>"Because this is a war of extermination," the Spartan declared.<p>

"Butâ€¦ I meanâ€¦," she stammered as the reality began to sink in.

"They don't want to just take territory, they want to wipe out our species," the Spartan continued pressing the point. "Come on, you're ONI. You have to know this is some sort of holy war for them."

Natalia avoided the man's fierce look. "You must think I'm a total prima donna," she stated quietly.

"Naw," he replied, "maybe a bit naÃ¯ve but that's only because you've been sheltered most of your life."

"Thanks, that means a lot," Natalia said genuinely. "You're right though. I have been sheltered. I never realized how much so until I came here. It's been different for you though. You've had it hard most of your life."

Mike patted her kindly on the shoulder. "It has but its even taken on a different tone for me since I got to Reach so don't feel bad." The Spartan removed Jorge's dog tags from a utility pouch and began to run them between his thumb and forefinger.

"You still thinking about him?" Natalia asked.

"Hard not to. He said to make it count," Mike's voice dropped forcing the woman to lean in to hear over the din of conflict.

"Just another weight to carry," the man continued quietly, turmoil etching his face, "another mark to fall short of."

"What do you mean?" Natalia asked softly, piercing eyes laser-locked on him.

Mike pulled out the medal he carried with him with the faded blue ribbon and tarnished gold medallion and held it in the opposite hand from Jorge's dog tags, as if weighing them in balance.

"I remember seeing that," Natalia confirmed, "when we were on the shuttle from the Grafton coming here." He nodded his head in ascent as she continued, "you said it was 'a reminder of the past, a legacy to live up to'. Then you called it a millstone."

"You remember that?" he responded incredulously.

"I remember everything you've said to me," she responded pointedly.

Mike paused for a moment, caught by not only the intensity of the statement but the look in the expressive woman's eyes. He believed the declaration entirely giving him pause for thought.

Natalia waited for Mike to speak but he couldn't, he was lost in thought. Finally she prodded him gently, "What did you mean by that?"

"It's nothing."

"That's not true!" she shot back forcefully. "Mike, I want to help you. Please don't shut me out. Let me in and let me share this with you. Stop carrying your burdens alone."

She really means it, Mike thought to himself. _She really does care. Its crazy but I think she really does love me. And meâ€|.that's still complicated. Okay, here goes._

"Okayâ€|," he breathed heavily, as if to steady himself. "About 400 years ago an ancestor of mine received this medal," the troubled man explained. "He was key in saving a city on Earth the first time alien invaders tried to wipe us out. I was named after him."

"Wait a minute," Natalia interrupted a glint of recognition in her voice, "what was his name?"

"Mike Nantz, same as mine. Why?"

"I know this story. He was a Marine at the Battle of Los Angeles in 2011 when the Aquoids tried to conquer Earth for our water, right?" she confirmed, a note of awe in her voice. "He was the key figure in not only the defense of that city but in figuring out how the rest of the world could defeat them. The guy's a legend."

"How the hell did you know that?" Mike spat out angrily at the added pressure he felt at the recognition.

"We studied it at Luna Academy. It was standard reading in the military history unit. Yea, then the Covenant wiped out the Aquoids before they attacked us. It was their first war of extermination." Natalia paused then shook her head as she connected the dots. "Yea, their first. Now we're their next target." The grim reality that she'd known intellectually but now felt in her heart was sobering and she realized what Mike had been saying earlier.

The Spartan rubbed his eyes, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. "You studied all this at school?"

"Sure. And I see now what you were trying to tell me. I guess I have been naïve and sheltered and didn't connect the dots." The woman paused for a moment as the reality sunk in but it only made her affections for the troubled man looking at her through his granite-grey eyes grow. "Anyway, the Battle of Los Angeles was a turning point in human history and worth knowing about. Mike Nantz was a hero. You should be proud of him."

"I am."

"Then what's the issue?" Natalia asked gently but still pointedly.

The Spartan sighed heavily, feeling the weight of his legacy. He rubbed the long white scar on his right jaw reflectively, remembering when he'd gotten it. "It's justâ€¦wellâ€¦I grew up hearing about this all the time from my grandfather and my father. The Nantz's have this big hero in the family. We have to live up to expectationsâ€¦to legacy. I felt that pressureâ€¦I still feel that pressureâ€¦." Mike snapped out of the melancholy he was feeling and declared testily, "Anyway, that was something from the past. You wouldn't understand."

"Legacyâ€¦," Natalia let the word hang in the air, like she hoped it would sprout wings and fly away. "I know what you mean about that."

"How do you know what I mean?" Mike asked sharply but not in anger. "I'm a freak of nature and you're the daughter of a billionaire."

"Spoiled little rich girl?" she retorted.

"Hey, I didn't say that," Mike defended himself.

"Yes, but you have thought it." She didn't wait for an answer; they both knew what it was. "And in a lot of ways that would be correct."

But it's not as easy as you think being a Misriah. There are expectations of you that come from outside—by how you're conditioned. There are expectations that come out of the legacy of being the 'daughter of a billionaire', as you describe me." She paused to let words sink in as she pondered their reality herself. "Then you never quite know what people really think of you—whether they want you for you or for what they can get. My father is always pulling strings for me—he wants the best but I'd like him to not always be there to 'help'. I'd like to be able to do things on my own. In some ways this invasion was a god-send for me. At least now I can stand on my own two feet and not have him manipulating things from the sidelines."

Mike paused for a moment, struck by the reality of the woman's circumstances. "Wow, that really sucks."

Natalia couldn't help but laugh at the frank assessment. "It does, doesn't it?" she responded.

"But what about your mother? Is she like that or does she try to balance things out?"

The attractive woman's features clouded. "I don't really have much of a relationship with my mother. My parents divorced when I was young and she moved off-planet and started a new life. I didn't quite figure into her equation." Her voice trailed off and she dropped her eyes, "Though I would have liked to."

Suddenly, the legacy of his parents didn't seem so bad. Though they were dead at least they loved and supported him to the end. But this? He wasn't sure what was worse.

"I'm sorry," Mike said quietly, spontaneously reaching out and taking her hand. Despite the armored gloves each wore he felt a sense of warmth at the gesture. Maybe they had more in common than he'd first thought. Maybe they could have something.

Natalia was touched by the sincerity of the simple statement. "Thank you, that means a lot." She leaned into him and rested her head on his chest. "And I'm sorry too for everything that's happened to you—the pressure to live up to the past, your family, what the Spartan program did to you—everything." Then her eyes lit up. "But you've turned into an amazing guy. And your parents would have been proud of you."

The simple declaration hit Mike square in the chest like a blow from a Gravity Hammer. Tears filled his eyes and he felt himself beginning to convulse with emotion. Unable to speak, he grabbed Natalia into a tight embrace so hard that if she'd not been in armor she would have been crushed. He fought to suppress the emotions but was not able to hold back a single agonized sob that let Natalia know she'd struck a cord with the solitary super soldier.

"Mike, I love you, I want to be with you," Natalia got caught up in the emotions of the moment emphatically making the declaration.

"I—.", "Mike choked out, "I love you too, Tali. Is it—would it—? Could this work for us?"

"Yes! Yes, we can make it work," she cried out forcefully.

"What about your father? What about all your friends?"

"I don't care. I want you," Natalia answered, squeezing his hand. "You make me come alive in a way I've never felt. I don't want anyone else but you." Then she leaned in closer and challenged him. "Are you strong enough to believe me and take the risk?"

Mike answered with his lips. Pulling her face up to his he kissed her hard. Her mouth opened immediately and their tongues intertwined. The taste of their salty tears seeping into their mouths only added to the ecstasy of the moment and each shed the baggage of legacy in their embrace.

"Ahem."

Gunnery Sergeant Stacker walked into the center of their embrace, bursting the bubble of the moment. "Hate to break up the party kids but there's still a war going on," he declared with a sour look on his face. "Mike, Pelicans need an escort to get the civvies away. Covvies are trying to bring down the shuttles. If you got nothing better to do they could use a good gunner to clear the path."

Mike released Natalia but did it slowly, unashamed of being caught in the kiss and stood up. "All right, I'm your man."

"Outstanding!" the ODSST exclaimed as two Falcons and a Pelican landed precariously on the small platform. "This is your ride, good luck Mike!"

"Get on board, Lieutenant," the pilot of the lead Falcon called over the comms. "We've got civilians that need immediate assistance."

Mike looked at Natalia already automatically moving back out of the way, head dropping in embarrassment at being ignored. "Seven, come on," he called out to her.

She looked up and pointed to her me as if to say 'me'?

"Got an extra gun on this bird and we're a team, hustle up."

Natalia sprinted over to the Falcon with a spring in her step and hopped in. Mike pulled the cocking lever of the M460 40mm grenade launcher and gave her a pat on the back as the engines whined to life. They'd face all this together.

30. Chapter 30

****Chapter 30****

****August 23, 1423 Hours, New Alexandria, Eposz****

Natalia happily jumped into the waiting Falcon, eager to work with Mike on the evacuation support mission. Instead of another automatic grenade launcher the other side-mounted armament was a M247H Heavy Machine Gun. She hesitated for a moment, unsure how the turret that would swivel and swing out worked so paused, obviously

uncertain.

The female pilot looked at the ONI officer and despite the helmet and visor covering her face it was obvious the Warrant Officer was smirking.

"No offense ma'am," the female pilot declared, "but it might be better if you man the 40 and let the Spartan take the gun."

Mike started to protest but Natalia realized she'd be better suited for the simpler weapon system on the craft that would be flying cover for the transports as she watched civilians beginning to load into a nearby Pelican for evacuation.

"No problem, warrant," Natalia confirmed, moving over to Mike's position. Your bird, your call."

Mike was moved by the gracious way the woman dealt with the perceived slight, not taking offense and readily accepting the order. He said nothing but shifted position to allow Natalia to take his place while he moved into the harness for the machine gun mount.

The pilot seemed relieved to not have an argument and so gave them an update as she increased power to the twin rotors then took off to hover above the still loading Pelican. "City's been under siege for the last five days," she reported over the aircraft's comms now that everyone was plugged in. "Thought we had it in hand. Then those corvettes showed up. Our fleet's scattered; pulling back. Hell, we all got orders to evacuate. Guess some of us just don't like leaving a job half-finished."

The rear ramp of the Pelican on the deck closed and the pilot of the craft called out on the open channel, "Evac transport Delta 1-5 to Evac Dispatch: loaded up, ready to go!"

"Delta 1-5, this is Evac Dispatch, copy that," the coordinator of the evacuation mission acknowledge from another part of town. "Proceed at your discretion."

"Midtown airspace is way too hot, gonna take an alternate route!" the pilot of Mike and Natalia's Falcon interjected, leading them in another direction while a second Falcon provided support on the other side of the transport aircraft filled with civilians.

The Pelican loaded and now airborne, the two Falcons pulled into an overwatch position to escort for the trip across the city to the starport where evacuations off planet were taking place. Both Mike and Natalia were stunned by the scale of combat all around the Traxus Tower area now that they had a bird's eye view. All around the strategic location there seemed to be skirmishes going on between UNSC and Covenant infantry.

"Warrant, we're going to provide some ground support where we can as we move to the evac point," Mike called out to the pilot. "Let us know if anything comes out of the sky we need to deal with."

"Roger that," she confirmed, "give those boys on a ground a hand."

Even before she'd finished Mike had let loose a long stream of

automatic fire from the machine gun on a group of Grunts and Elites pressing in on an outmatched UNSC Army platoon. Empty shell casings fell like rain as Mike poured much needed fire support down from above, allowing the beleaguered Army troopers the opportunity to regroup. The Falcon was flying fast not allowing him to linger on one spot for too long which might have been for the better considering how desperate the fight was becoming for the humans. Flying over a roof top of another sky scraper Mike spotted a Brute Chieftain wielding a deadly gravity hammer cutting through a group of Army troopers. Bringing his fire to bear, Mike shredded the behemoth before it could dispatch any more soldiers.

He realized he'd not heard much fire from the grenade launcher on the other side. "Tali, what's going on?" Mike demanded. "Bring your fire to bear on ground targets."

"They're coming to fast!" Natalia complained. "I can't lock onto anything. My tracker is going haywire."

"Forget tracking. Lead your launcher ahead and just pepper the area where you see any Covvies concentrating. Help our guys on the ground!"

Natalia didn't say anything but Mike did hear the satisfying _pop pop_ of the grenade launcher shooting 40mm rounds down to the ground. He knew he'd embarrassed the woman but there was no time for niceties. He felt bad considering their conversation and kiss only minutes earlier but he couldn't allow his sentiments to get in the way. Readjusting his position he took his growing frustration out by firing even faster.

Mike nor Natalia had the time to think about their frustrations. Almost immediately several flights of Covenant fighters swooped in to attack the vulnerable transport.

"Bandits, eleven o'clock! Gunners, bring your fire to bear!" the Falcon pilot yelled at Mike and Natalia. "Keep our bird safe."

Despite their best efforts and that of the other escort the nimble alien fighters punched through and began to rain plasma fire down on the transport.

"Delta 1-5 to dispatch: Banshee squadron on my tail! Taking fire!" the Pelican pilot called out desperately.

"Copy, Delta 1-5. Can you-," the evac dispatcher tried to stay calm but was cut off.

"Mayday!" Delta 1-5 called out. "Port engines hit, we're going in! I'm going to try to set her down!"

"Damn it!" Mike yelled, punching the metal wall of the Falcon with his free hand in frustration and denting it.

"Bravo 2 this is Bravo 1," the pilot of the lead Falcon called out to the one carrying the members of Noble Team. "We'll stay with Delta 1-5 and make sure it lands safe. You peel off and support where you can. Good luck."

"Roger that, take care of yourself," the tough female pilot responded to her colleague with a hint of emotion in her voice.

Free of escort responsibility for the moment the Falcon's pilot moved away from the tall buildings and dropped down the stepped hill the commercial area had been built upon to command a view of the sea. Dipping down Mike found ample opportunities on the lower levels that were now swarming with Covenant infantry moving to the upper levels where the UNSC infantry were holding on.

"Tali," Mike called out, "send some of this back to command, they need to see what's coming up from the lower levels."

"Got it, I'll take care of it."

Moving lower they traveled through a ruggedly beautiful park area with a mixture of rock formations and trees. Again, the tranquility of the place was destroyed by the hordes of Covenant moving through. Mike and Natalia found ample targets and were kept busy seeking to disrupt the flow of the invaders.

As the Falcon pushed through the park they came to a series of expensive condominiums right on the water but now abandoned as they moved towards the starport to find other transports to assist. As the Falcon moved back inland communications from ground forces seeking assistance began to become more urgent, one in particular caught their attention.

"Fox Actual to UNSC frigate Stalwart Dawn: request immediate airstrike on Covenant corvette over starport!" a UNSC Army NCO called out urgently.

"Solid copy, Fox Actual," the light frigate's communications officer acknowledged. "Longswords are unavailable at this time, over."

"This is civilian transport 6 Echo 2: I need to go now, sergeant-major!" the captain of the evacuation craft's southern drawl cut in over the communications of the unit defending their launch pad.

"Hold on, Echo 2," Sergeant-Major Duvall tried to calm the civilian pilot down. "Stalwart Dawn, I have multiple personal craft loaded with civilians. I have got to get them out of this city. I need air support, now!"

"As soon something frees up, you'll be the first to-," the Stalwart Dawn answered but was cut off.

"Not good enough!" Duvall barked.

"I've got six hundred souls on board, Sergeant Major! I can't wait any longer!" The ship's captain seemed on the edge of panic.

"Negative, Echo 2, I can't cover you!" the Army NCO tried to explain. "Do not take off!"

But instead of listening the pilot ignored the command and the civilian cruiser could be seen taking off in the distance. Banshees screamed in as the ship tried to stay low and move out to sea but as

Mike watched in horror from his position in the open side of the Falcon the Covenant Corvette over the starport instantly fired on the transport and hit it on the port side with a plasma torpedo, crippling the craft.

"Oh my god!" the pilot of Mike and Natalia's Falcon cried out involuntarily.

"Mayday! Mayday!" the pilot of the civilian transport screamed.

"6 Echo 2, can you maintain altitude?" Sergeant Major Duvall called out desperately.

"Negative! We're going down!"

"Son of a bitch! I can't watch this...", the Falcon pilot interjected as they watched the transport begin to dip, angry orange fire shooting out of one of its engines. Unable to maintain altitude the craft filled with civilians went nose down and crashed into the harbor.

"Fox Actual... Should we send search-and-rescue birds?" the evacuation dispatcher asked anxiously.

"Negative, dispatch. No point," Duvall responded his voice heavy as the transport slowly sank in the churning water.

Mike growled angrily, feeling impotent after watching the grisly scene unfold before his eyes. The Spartan's IFF showed thick with red and a steadily dropping number of friendlies to oppose. He also knew no other transport was going to get off the ground with that Corvette on station over the city. Opening up a channel on his comms he called out, "Fox Actual, this is Noble Six. I'm on overwatch with my fire team and offering assistance, over."

Duvall responded pleasantly surprise. "Noble team? Hell yes, I'd like your assistance Spartan."

"Roger that," Mike responded, eager to get on the ground and into the fight, "set a way point and we'll meet you there." He thought for a moment about how he was speaking for Natalia and he wondered what she thought but put it out of his head as the Army NCO's position popped up. Then shifting to the pilot of the Falcon said, "Warrant, set up down on that waypoint. We're doing no good up here."

"Copy that, good hunting Spartan," the pilot responded grimly.

Natalia felt her heart begin to race as she could see the pandemonium below. The Covenant had overrun the UNSC missile defense position and it was more of a free-for-all brawl than battle. A twinge of resentment at Mike for putting them into this situation brewed up, especially after their conversation and kiss a short time ago. She wanted to be away from this place with him, to forget it all, to have a chance for a life together. But instead they were going from one desperate situation to a worse one. Still, they were together, fighting together for a cause greater than themselves. As she watching the swirling battle they were about to jump into she realized she'd have it no other way.

The Falcon approached a park area along the shore of the lake, where two missile batteries had been placed but were inoperative due to the Covenant having overrun the position and shutting them down. UNSC Army troopers from Sgt.-Major Duvall's company were unsuccessfully trying to retake the position and had been pushed back to a beachhead about a half kilometer away. The Falcon hovered six feet above the ground and Mike and Natalia jumped out to assist. The added firepower of the two members of Noble team was enough to clear out the light screen of Grunts and Jackals from the area allowing the humans an opportunity to consolidate.

Mike and Natalia found a stocky Army NCO of middle height wearing non-standard Spartan chest armor as the rest of his team set up a defensive cordon.

"I'm Noble Six, this is Noble Seven," he introduced them to the sergeant-major who had pronounced worry lines on his face. "What's the situation here?"

"Good to meet you Spartan. Sergeant-Major Duvall," he introduced himself. "Hell of a day so far... Let's keep it from getting any worse, huh?" Duvall pushed back his forge cap to reveal black hair. "Covvies are all over my missile batteries, and I got five thousand civilians waiting for passage out. I need you to arm those batteries and fire those missiles from the central terminal. Understood? Corvette's been a pain in my ass for too damn long. Give it hell, Spartan!"

"We'll get it done for you, sergeant-major," Mike affirmed as Natalia nodded her head vigorously, caught up in the adrenaline rush of the moment.

The area secure, the rest of Duvall's fire team joined the trio. "All right, this is Noble Six and Seven. They're joining us for our little party." The sergeant-major paused, looking at their objective and then back to the area where the stranded transports waited and a hard look came over his face. "Troopers! We need to push 'em back off our beach!"

The small force and two members of Noble Team took time to rearm from the supplies scattered on the beach. A Warthog sat abandoned nearby so a plan came to Mike. "Listen up! The Hog becomes the point of our spear. I need someone on the gun, rest of you move in the wake. We push up to the batteries and this becomes our firebase. We press out from there and get them online."

"Outstanding, Six," Duvall agreed.

"Civilian transport 7 Echo 3 to Fox Actual: my engines are hot, waiting for your go," the captain of another rescue ship called out urgently.

"Copy that, 7 Echo 3. We're working on it," the sergeant-major responded. Then turning back to Mike he urged, "We got to get this done!"

"All right, lets saddle up," the Spartan called.

Without thinking, Natalia jumped into the passenger side of the M12 Force Application Vehicle and ensured she had a fresh magazine in her

assault rifle. Mike gave a nod of approval as an Army private racked a shell into the chamber of the LAAG then fired up the engine. The Spartan hit the accelerator and they moved off the beach toward the heavily defended missile battery positions.

Traveling swiftly through a defile in the sheer rock wall down to a beach the party quickly came to the first battery sitting on an elevated concrete pad. Signs of battle were everywhere but the rapidity of their advance had caught the Covenant off guard. So with the private covering with the LAAG Mike jumped out and was able to reach the first battery mounted on a round coaxial base without opposition

"That's the first missile battery, lieutenant," Sergeant-Major Duvall confirmed. "Get it armed!"

He found the activation switch and hit it, the response was immediate.

"First battery is armed," Duvall confirmed. "The other one's to your north."

"Sergeant-Major, Covenant are banging on my bay door," the pilot of 7 Echo 3 cut in, "I got families and wounded onboard. I got to get airborne!"

"Easy, 7 Echo 3. Spartan's going to clear the skies," Duvall tried to remain calm but the sense of urgency in his voice was evident.

The sound of Covenant responding to the action began to fill the air and Brutes could be heard rallying to stop the human counterattack. Mike stayed on foot while another trooper from the fire team took his place driving the Warthog. Moving from the first battery the Spartan hooked around and up a set of stairs then came to a bridge leading to the next battery. With the rest of the troopers and the Warthog providing flanking fire he mounted the base of bridge. Several Brutes charged at him so with one smooth motion he switched from his Assault Rifle to the Brute Shot he still carried. Popping off two quick rounds he charged across hearing the comforting sound of the heavy staccato of the LAAG and UNSC small arms fire. With a strong screen he was able to fight his way in and using the Brute Shot systematically eliminate the party of Brutes guarding the second battery. Though another group of Brutes and several Jackals fired at him from a distance he was able to activate the second anti-aircraft gun.

"That's it, batteries primed!" Duvall called out triumphantly. "Now get over to the East Compound, and fire those missiles!"

"Sergeant Major! The Covvies are almost through my door!" the pilot of 7 Echo 3 called out in near panic.

"Steady, Echo 3! That corvette is still up there!" Duvall responded, staying calm while remembering the last civilian craft that tried to take off prematurely.

Mike felt the sense of urgency and pushed on, following the waypoint the sergeant-major set to the fire control center. His IFF lit up red as the Covenant forces rallied to stop him. Though less than two hundred meters away the going was tough as a strong blocking force,

including two Brute Chieftains, poured out of the building holding the missile command console.

Traveling through some rough grass rather than the concrete path to flank around Mike called for support. "Need some help up here pushing through to the fire control."

"We're hard pressed holding the batteries, Six," Sergeant-Major Duvall replied over the sound of an intense firefight. "I'll see what I can do."

"I'm on my way Mike, moving to your position now," Natalia called.

The Spartan couldn't wait so waded into the fray. Leaping over a rocky protrusion he easily pushed aside a pair of Jackals blocking the way to the walkway leading to a balcony holding the fire control panel. Seeing his way clear Mike moved towards the staircase when the armored Brutes leaped down from a higher vantage point. One swiped out with a massive paw, knocking Mike aside like a rag doll despite his weight. The other charged in but the Spartan deftly rolled away and tossed a plasma grenade he'd picked up along the way at it. The deadly explosive stuck to the behemoth and went off, taking the beast's arm off. Mike followed with a steady stream of fire from his assault rifle with the other.

Dancing around to avoid counter fire he made his way back to the injured Brute and beat it down with several smashing blows from the butt of his Assault Rifle. Several more Jackals came pouring down the stairs as he tried to move up and he smashed into them with a lowered shoulder to short out their shields. Then among them he walked fire to bear emptying his clip. Slapping in a fresh one he began to move up the stairs towards the fire control area but then caught sight of Natalia. The ONI officer was engaged with the wounded Brute he hadn't finished off. The Jiralhanae bull rushed her and though she tried to fire on it the juggernaut caught her in the midsection throwing her hard against the retaining wall. She fell with a sickening thud. The Brute roared and moved in for the kill.

Everything had gone white when the Brute hit her and Natalia never realized she'd smashed into the wall. If not for her MJOLNIR armor every bone in her body would have been broken. Still seeing stars in her eyes the woman was sluggish to respond. The Brute stood over her, roaring triumphantly. Her weapon was gone so she couldn't defend herself. The privileged woman had never thought of death, even discomfort was a foreign emotion, but she was surprisingly calm as she knew she was about to die. She hoped Mike would think about her often when she was gone.

Mike reacted instantly but knew he was out of position being more than thirty meters away. If he shot he knew he couldn't take the armored Brute down at that range before he stove in Natalia's head. Rage filled the man laced with fear, fear he'd never felt. It was the fear of loss, of losing the woman he'd come to love. A scream ripped out from deep within his soul and without thinking he jumped.

Natalia kept her eyes open despite the fear that now overwhelmed her. She would look death in the eye like a soldier. She'd die making Mike proud. No one else mattered, not her father, mother, MacKenzie or her

friends. Only Mike mattered and only him would she miss.

The hammer blow came down and the woman winced involuntarily but the sun beating high in the sky was momentarily blocked and the arm was stopped. An armored warrior in MJOLNIR stood suddenly beside the surprised beast and instead of it beating her to death the Spartan beat the Jiralhanae into the ground with a rain of blows.

Mike had come from nowhere to rescue her.

"You saved my life" she declared, looking up. With the sun bracketed his helmeted head it was as if a halo framed the man's face as he helped her to her feet.

"Hey, after what I said before we got here I wasn't about to let you die until we get to figure all this stuff out." Mike gave her a quick embrace then moved to activate the batteries. Turning as he trotted off back towards the stairs to the balcony he called over his shoulder, "Besides, I'm not going to let the 'firsts' get away that easy."

Natalia was confused by the statement as she watched Mike move to activate the batteries. But she didn't care. She loved him before he'd saved her life and now, well, the feelings were on overdrive. He'd protected her in a way no one else ever had. A surge of adrenaline coursed through her body and suddenly she wished they could be alone for an hour or so. The thought was delicious.

Mike pushed the thought out of his mind, focusing on getting to the fire control switch. With the Brutes out of the way the remaining Grunts scattered and the Jackals pulled back attempting to snipe from a distance.

"That's it! They've breached the landing bay!" Echo 3's pilot screamed.

"Copy that. It's now or never, Six!" Duvall called out urgently.

Mike came up to the fire control panel on the lip of a balcony overlooking the bay and the batteries. A dead UNSC trooper lay slumped over the panel, a testimony to the Army's effort to maintain the city's defenses. Immediately he hit the pronounced red button to reset the fire control system. He was greeted by a series of lights on the panel and he could hear in the distance the metallic whine of the system reactivating and beginning to seek targets.

Sergeant-Major Duvall caught it as well and called out triumphantly, "Missile defense online. All evac transports, you are cleared for takeoff! Repeat, you are clear for takeoff! Go, now!"

Before the NCO's sentence was finished six homing missiles shot up into the sky, aiming for the corvette. The full spread of the missiles hit the corvette crippling it as a series of civilian transport flew overhead.

"Civilian transports away," Duvall confirmed. "You saved a lot of lives today, Six."

Mike walked away from the building and onto a grassy vista overlooking the bay, watching the civilian transports speeding over him and into space. He took off his helmet, weary from the fight, as the rest of the UNSC assault force mopped up the remaining Covenant in the area.

Natalia gingerly over to join him, helmet in hand.

"You okay?" Mike asked kindly.

"A bit sore, she answered, trying to sound tough. "Who am I kidding? It hurts like hell but I'm alive, thanks to you," Natalia replied genuinely, eyes sparkling.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "You know I would have done this for anyone I could, right?"

"Yes, but you did it for me, and that makes it special," Natalia responded. "And you did it because you love me," the woman added emphatically.

The Lone Wolf thought for a moment about the comment. He thought of the armor-assisted jump he'd made, something he'd never done before and knew her words were true. "Yea, I guess you're right," he chuckled. "I didn't want to lose you."

Natalia spontaneously embraced the man then gave him a kiss on the cheek, her face aglow. "I love you Mike!" she exclaimed, then she thought for a moment. "Hey, what did you mean by 'firsts'?"

Mike got a playful look on his face and a smile filled his usually hard countenance. "You knowâ€|first kiss, first relationship, first love, first time doingâ€| I mean havingâ€|.", " his voice trailed off in embarrassment as his face turned red.

Natalia understood what he meant. Her heart soared although she felt a distinct tingling sensation in a lower part of her body. Pulling him as tight as their armor allowed she kissed him hard and with passion. Moving back so she could stare into his eyes she whispered, "I can't wait either. We really need to find a place to be alone soon."

Mike's eyes lit up with recognition of what she meant and he nodded his head vigorously. "Yea, soon." He closed his eyes, his lips parting slightly as he prepared to lose himself in this woman again.

Then a familiar voice brought them back to the reality of war.

"...you copy? Repeat, this is Noble Two. Noble Six, Noble Five, do you copy?" The familiar voice of Kat cut in on his helmet radio sitting beside them.

Mike grabbed his helmet, and with a forlorn look to Natalia placed it back on his head. The hiss of the vacuum seal engaging had a particularly sad note to it for Natalia. "Another time," his voice went out through their personal channel.

"You better believe it" she whispered to herself.

Back in Spartan-mode Mike answered the hail. "This is Six. Go ahead, Noble Two."

"We picked up your transponder and Sevens about an hour ago, but we could not risk open comms," Kat reported. "Covenant have this city sealed tight. We're getting nothing from Jorge."

"He didn't make it," Mike replied, voice dropping. Instantly Natalia gripped his gloved hand to give comfort.

"Understood..." Kat didn't need to say anymore. "What's the situation at starport exit?"

"The last transport is away," he responded.

"Alright. We're bringing you to us," Kat informed them.

Mike drew a signal flare out of a utility pouch and popped it. The red glow contrasted the green on the ground. He stood there, still holding Natalia's hand, watching the damaged Covenant Corvette retreating from the city, wondering if they'd ever get that hour they both desperately wanted.

31. Chapter 31

****Chapter 31****

****August 23, 1857hrs, New Alexandria****

Mike and Natalia sat on opposite sides of the open rear ramp of the Pelican taking them back to Noble Team. The overwhelming devastation they were witnessing from their vantage point flying above the cosmopolitan city dulled the ache each had for the other. Dark clouds of smoke from burning structures caused the sky to be duller than the hour would dictate. Fires raged in several high-rise structures providing light to a dusk-like scene.

Anger filled the Spartan at the wanton destruction he was witnessing and the seeming futility of all their efforts of late. He had been used to solo operations where he would move in, get the job done, and move out. This type of mission was unfamiliar to him. In agitation he got up and started to pace around the deck of the Pelican, fidgeting with his kit.

Natalia could tell what Mike was feeling despite the fact both of them wore their helmets. She was beginning to read his body language, showing the intimacy of their connection. Instinctively she prepared to go to him but then realized he likely needed some space to process what he was feeling so she continued to sit silently, heart aching, wanting to take him away from all of this and show him another life.

Mike continued to pace, agitation building. He thought of all the people who had died so far, civilian and military alike. He was supposed to stop this. He was a Spartan. Yet it didn't seem to make any difference. Looking again out the back of the craft the sky was silhouetted by fires causing an unearthly glow depression grew.

Then a new thought entered the thoughtful man's mind.

Mike focused on all the people they had saved; the civilian ships that had gotten away and troopers rescued. He was making a difference. Perhaps not on the scale he would like but still, his life was mattering.

Then there was Tali.

He looked over where the woman sat and smiled. He could tell she was staring at him intently and likely had that look of concern on her face she seemed to get when she caught him being reflective. It no longer irritated him but rather gave him a sense of comfort. He did matter, and so did this. He would fight on to the best of his ability and love this woman to the best of his ability. Beyond that, he'd leave the rest in the hands of the divine.

The engines of the Pelican began to whine in protest as the pilot slowed to prepare for landing. A launch pad with several Falcons could be seen as the Pelican flared, did a ninety degree turn and settled down on the platform. Mike and Natalia jumped out and the aircraft immediately took off on another mission. Everyone still had a sense of urgency; they would fight until there was no fight left.

Commander Carter peeled off from the rest of Noble Team though Mike notice Kat was absent. His heart sank for a moment, wondering if she'd fallen to the same fate as Jorge but then reminded himself he'd just talked to her less than an hour earlier. Noble Team's leader motioned him away from the rest so while Natalia moved towards the others the two were able to talk alone.

"Your report will have to wait, lieutenant," Carter declared after the two shook hands. "The Covenant is jamming all comms to Command. Kat needs your help running a counter-op."

"Sounds good," Mike answered without emotion. "I'm ready to get back in the fight. I've got a full ammo load out and I'm good to go."

The pair began to walk towards the waiting Falcons as one took off on an operation. "It's good to have you back," Carter commented quietly.

"Sorry I came alone," Mike replied, working hard to keep the emotion out of his voice.

"Make him proud," Noble's leader declared.

A flood of apprehension and perceived pressure began to well up within Mike though that was not the intention of Carter. The Spartan still struggled with the death of the big Spartan II. He dropped his head, as if feeling a great weight, as they walked back toward the rest of the team.

As the two Spartans talked by themselves Natalia stood awkwardly near the remainder of Noble Team, suddenly apprehensive and unsure of herself again. She'd been working alone with Mike for so long she'd forgotten the insecurity she'd felt around the rest of the elite super soldiers.

Emile turned and looked at her for a moment. The skull carved into his helmet gave the volatile Spartan a sinister look. He put his hand jauntily onto his hip and walked closer to the ONI officer. Natalia cringed at what she expected to happen and looked over helplessly at Mike who was still engaged in conversation with Commander Carter, waiting for the expected criticism.

"Heard you guys kicked some ass out there," Emile declared, stopping right in front of the woman. "And you, ONI girl, were in the thick of it gettin' your hands dirty."

The others looked at the volatile Spartan cradling his M45 Tactical Shotgun carefully then he slammed Natalia enthusiastically on the shoulder, causing her to wince, but continued, "Way to go Seven!"

"Whatâ€¦what do you mean?" Natalia stammered in confusion, feeling like a failure, so caught totally unprepared for the declaration and show of affection.

"Ran into an old friend of yours. He said you were all beast out there," Noble Four stated, nodding his head vigorously.

"Who was that?" Natalia asked, confusion growing.

"Gunny Stacker."

"He said that?" Natalia responded in shock. "I thought he hated me."

Emile laughed at the total confusion he'd caused, enjoying the woman's confusion. "Yea, he probably does. But he's also fair and calls things like he sees them. Said you've been on a tear the past few days and racking up a major body count."

"But I'm ONI. How could he have anything good to say about me?"

"True, he hates ONI, but then so do I," the Spartan challenged, hands on hips.

The woman's natural reaction was to shrink away but instead she decided to take a risk, emboldened by what had happened of late with Mike. "So what about me?" she asked.

"You?" he thought about it for a moment. "You're not ONI, you're okay."

Natalia beamed inside her helmet, heart overjoyed at the acceptance she'd received. "Thank you, that means a lot."

Emile shrugged and turned his attention to Commander Carter and Mike who had walked over to join them.

The leader of Noble Team called them all together. "Okay, listen up. We have a priority mission. We need to get city comms back up to co-ord the remaining defenses. So we break into two teams. Six, you and Seven seem to be working well together so stick with it. Take Falcon One. Emile, you and Jun are in Two. I'll co-ord from here and provide QRF for any hot spots we find. Kat's arrived at ONI

headquarters and will be looking for targets for us. She'll lead us to our objectives. Let's move with a purpose Noble. The clock's ticking."

Then, as the absence of Jorge could be felt, although he said nothing Carter went around to each and patted them on the shoulder. "Okay, let's move."

The team broke up again and Mike and Natalia moved to the waiting Falcon but found there was no pilot.

Kat cut in on their comms channel, as if she was watching from a video feed. "Get your wings back on, lieutenant. You're flying this Falcon. Oh, and by the way, it's good to have you back with us. You too Seven."

Mike jumped into the empty pilot's seat and did a quick check of the instruments to make sure everything was ready while Natalia moved into one of the side gunner's positions. Confident everything was in order the Spartan then hit the ignition and the twin rotors began to slowly spin to life then quickly moved faster than the eye could see.

"Covenant have deployed comm jammers at the high-rises across the city," Kat reported. "We can't hear Holland, and he can't hear us. When I find them, you hit them, hard."

The Falcon gently lifted off the landing pad then hovered above the city. Mike took the opportunity before a location was found to familiarize himself with the controls. The side mounted turret lit up as Natalia opened fire on several nearby targets of opportunity that had shown themselves, displaying not only familiarity but also the soaring confidence she felt after Emile's declaration.

A tall skyscraper which had been torrentially burning collapsed as they waited, another testimony of the destruction going on, grimly bringing the pair back to reality.

"Stand by, Six...", Kat came back onto the channel a short time later. "One of our Trooper squads went silent after the hospital got hit. I'll mark the location. Complete their mission, and take out that jammer."

"Roger that, on our way," Mike confirmed as a waypoint popped up on the Spartan's HUD. He turned towards it, increasing power so they could fly faster, realizing that once again he and Natalia were going into battle together while the rest of Noble were sent to another jammer location. He'd fought alone for so long it was second nature to him yet now he felt good having someone, especially someone he loved, with him. Yet there was also creeping fear beginning to build. He did love her and he didn't want to lose her. He couldn't bear the thought of her dying especially as he still grappled with Jorge's death. "Shake it off Mike," he said to himself.

"Say again?" Natalia responded, having heard the comment that had gone out over their team channel.

"Nothing," he shot back, embarrassed at the oversight then quickly got back in control. They had a mission to do so he pushed his feelings aside. "We're only about a klick out Tali," he called out on

his internal channel. "Take out anything along the way that isn't human. When we get there you clear a path for us."

The New Alexandria Hospital could be seen to their front, a tall angular building with a glowing blue hospital sign shining in the darkened sky as night approached. The lights on the landing pad were still lit up so it was easy for Mike to make the approach.

There was no one in the area, human or Covenant, so they landed easily. As Mike and Natalia exited the Falcon the woman hoped that perhaps the jamming had caused them to lose comms and they would find the Army forces in control of the structure. But then she realized if Kat had sent them there it was because a jammer had been placed.

The pair approached a set of metallic double doors that would take them into the receiving area for the hospital and so following Mike Natalia took a deep breath, checked the ammo count on her assault rifle and prepared for what they'd find on the other side.

Rather than pause and seek to assess the situation Mike went charging in, knowing time was of the essence. The entry doors slide open with a gentle whir and he immediately saw a group of four Grunts. Each had an opaque blue-purple glow around them indicating some form of advanced shielding. Natalia raised her rifle to open fire but Mike motioned her to stop. Instead he moved to the first one, beat through its shield and then stove in its head before moving to the next.

Natalia watched with a renewed sense of horror and fascination as Mike pummeled the second Grunt to death with a series of savage blows to the head. She too saw the shielding but didn't know what it was. By the time the Spartan was dispatching the third Unggoy the fourth became aware of the threat. Too late, the squat creature fired off two hurried rounds from its Plasma Pistol before Mike open fired and drilled it with a series of armor piercing rounds.

The receiving area of the hospital became quiet so the pair moved towards a circular balcony that wrapped around the level allowing them to look down and up several floors. They wondered where everyone was until their IFFs sudden lit up and the comms channel picked up radio chatter from the UNSC Army forces in the building.

"Contacts, two at ten o'clock! I'll hold them off until you get to the other side!" one trooper called out desperately.

"Cover that doorway!" another added in near panic, "Move, move, move!_"

At the same time a pair of Jackals emerged from a side corridor crouched behind their energy shields, blocking Mike and Natalia's way.

Mike decided it was time to go loud so led with a fragmentation grenade. The explosive landed in the middle, blowing one of the avian creatures right over the side of the railing to tumble to its death and the other had its shield fused by the explosion. Mike then shot it with his Assault Rifle.

A new squad of Grunts, carrying the same colored overshields, charged in trying to block their way. Natalia opened fire but her rounds

bounced off the enhancement. Mike added his fire and they were able to take out the first two. The second in the bunch's methane tank exploded causing it to shoot its yellow gaseous content all around causing confusion for the rest of the group. Mike moved in, beating one to death while Natalia emptied a full clip to take out the other.

Mike could see a large Covenant force massing to attack on the level below. The observant Spartan could also see they all carried the enhanced shielding which would make it nearly impossible for them to overcome in those numbers. The seasoned Spartan knew there had to be a Huragok around. The enigmatic, floating gaseous sacks which the UNSC called Engineers seemed to have the ability to enhance the Covenant so Mike knew he had to eliminate it first. He desperately moved around the perimeter of the railing looking all around to find the tell-tale creature with jellyfish-like entrails. Then, up in the shadows of the level above him he saw it, trying to hide. The Engineer seemed to realize Mike had found it and so let out a scared squeal as the Spartan took aim and opened fire. He hit it and the rounds easily punched through the outer skin. The Engineer deflated then crashed to the ground dropping all the overshields of the massed Covenant forces.

"Come on," Mike called to Natalia, "let's press them before they can reorganize."

He charged down the parquet wood flooring to the next level clearing out the screen of Jackals and Grunts along the way. The Unggoy realized they'd lost their overshields so began to fall back in panic.

It seemed as if the pair from Noble Team had found the concourse of the hospital and here not only were there the lesser Covenant fighters but they ran into a Brute as well. As the pair pushed through the invaders defensive screen they picked up more radio chatter from the beleaguered Army unit showing a growing sense of urgency so they continued to press on.

More Brutes, supported by Grunts and Jackals, appeared as Mike and Natalia continued to press on. They got into the middle of a major fire fight as a mass of Covenant surrounded them. Mike dodged and moved but Natalia's inexperience finally caught up to her. A series of Brute Shot hits drained her shield while the staccato sound of a Needler unloading added to the din. The woman's shield drained and the alarm claxon sounded the warning. Natalia looked around in panic, seeking a place for cover to go for the shield to regenerate but she was surrounded. Rounds began to chip away at the MJOLNIR armor and in moments they would be connecting with flesh. Panic overcame her and she couldn't think. She started to run until Mike came into her vision and grabbed her hard. He knelt down and popped a Bubble Shield over them. The see-through blue honeycomb-like shield absorbed all the rounds flying in. Several Brutes screamed in outrage at being denied the kill as Mike stood guard over the ONI officer as her protection topped up.

'You good?' he asked.

She checked her level. "Fully charged, let's get that Jammer," she responded confidently though her heart was still in her throat from the near call.

The pair pressed on and fought to the pinned down group of UNSC Army troopers. The combined firepower was enough to overcome the remaining Covenant forces so they were able to defeat them and gain a moment of respite.

"Thanks for the assist, Spartan," an Army NCO declared. "Jammer's right over here."

Mike walked over to the squat black device that sat on four legs. He noticed an Engineer floating above it, cowering in fright. The Spartan looked at it for a moment, feeling bad for the creature. He could see an explosive belt around it and wondered how it came to work for the Covenant. Part of him wanted to spare the creature but the experienced warrior knew that it would never allow the device to be destroyed.

"Sorry, buddy," Mike said quietly as he blasted the Engineer.

It popped and fell with a squishy thud on top of the Jammer. Mike then took a quick look and punched a button to overload the device. Satisfied he'd taken care of it, the Spartan headed back to the rest of the group who were maintaining a defensive cordon though there didn't seem to be a Covenant forces left.

"Noble Two to Noble Six: I'm showing the hospital jammer offline," Kat confirmed from her vantage point, "nice work. Soon as you can, I need you back in your Falcon."

"Thanks again for the help," the Army sergeant leading the group in the hospital stated appreciatively. "We'd have been screwed if the two of you hadn't showed up."

Natalia noted she was included in the declaration and her heart filled with joy and pride.

"No problem, Sarge," Mike added, unmoved by the praise. "You take care of yourselves."

A whoosh sound filled the atrium area causing everyone to look in surprise.

"Noble Two to Noble Six: you've got incoming tangos!" Kat called out urgently as a group of Elite Rangers appeared to fly in on their antigravity packs.

"We've got jumpers!" one of the troopers called out a warning to the rest of the squad right before a round from a Focus Rifle caught him in the chest.

"Damn! Look how they move!" another added, sprinting for cover as the atrium lit up with fire.

The Covenant Specials Ops troops had caught the human forces off guard and in their distinctive greyish white armor posed an intimidating picture.

"Fall back, regroup," Mike barked as two more troopers went down under sustained fire from Plasma Repeater rounds. He became aware that deadly Needler rounds were hitting him and could see several of

the Rangers sporting Needle Rifles.

The remaining UNSC forces moved back to a better position and found cover. Mike did a quick assessment and could tell from the IFF on his HUD more forces were inbound. They needed to strike fast or they'd be overwhelmed.

The Army troopers began to open fire but their rounds seemed to bounce harmlessly off the enhanced armor of the Sangheili rangers.

"Tali, you cover this spot and set up a fire base, I'll start dropping their shields. You guys finish them off." Mike took off at a run directly towards the main body of rangers forming for an attack.

The woman now knew this was not due to any perceived inability on her part but was rather a strategy to win the fight. "Sergeant," she yelled at the NCO, "detail three men to cover the lieutenant's advance. When he drops their shields you drop them."

"Yes ma'am," the hardened veteran acknowledged, not questioning the now authoritative woman.

Natalia thought for a moment just how much had changed, then gave her next order, "The rest of you with me. We hold this strong point. Nothing gets through our line."

Mike charged into the massing rangers and began to physically beat through their shields until they shorted out. He then heard the satisfying sound of Assault Rifle fire as the Army troopers detailed to cover him opened up. He couldn't help but smile despite the intensity of the fight at how well he and Natalia were working together. It made him look all the more forward to that 'hour together' they talked about earlier.

Despite the mobility of the dangerous Elite Rangers with their anti-gravity packs the concentrated fire of the troopers and Mike's intense attacks overwhelmed the smaller force.

Still, there was no time to rest.

"We got more coming," Mike called out as he watched his IFF. "Let's go get them before they can get online."

Charging up the stairs from the Atrium the UNSC forces ran smack into a new and more dangerous threat.

"Ultra's!" the sergeant leading the troopers called out in warning. The next moment a round from the lead Elite's Concussion Rifle hit and the NCO and two other soldiers were thrown in the air like rag dolls from the Directed Energy Rifle.

"Fall back!" Mike yelled. "Find cover!" he called as a splash of Needle rounds hit and began to deplete his armor.

The Spartan in turn though deftly pulled a frag grenade and tossed it at the three who had concentrated. The impact ignited the magazine of one of the Concussion Rifles causing a chain reaction explosion. One who had been detached from the others came at the Spartan but Mike

charged in, switching to his shotgun on the run. He pumped three rounds in quick succession into the Sangheili who went down wounded with a roar of frustration. Mike kept going and finished off the others with shotgun rounds to the head. He heard the reassuring staccato of Assault Rifle fire behind and did a head check to see Natalia had taken the initiative to finish off the other Ultra he'd wounded before it could get back into the fight. A small party of Skirmishers had been with the Elites but they began to fall back with their leaders gone. Mike was about to go after them when the remaining Army troopers surged past him, eager for revenge for their losses. So he instead swept the area with his IFF and found it clear.

"We're good here, sir," the corporal now in charge of the remaining forces reported after they'd regrouped. "You can head back to your bird."

Mike shook hands, made sure Natalia was okay then they moved back towards their waiting Falcon.

Jumping in, the sky was getting darker as night began to fall and was made darker by the thick clouds hanging low over the sky. Mike hit the starter and the twin rotors began to turn to life. The helicopter took off as Natalia prepped her gun. They could see in the distance a Covenant CCS Class Cruiser moving away from the center of the city to the outskirts. Then in horror the pair watched as an intense red beam of energy shot out of the midsection of the ship and slammed into the ground. A massive shock wave hit causing another skyscraper to collapse and even the air they flew through to be disturbed.

"What's that?" Natalia screamed, a new panic starting to creep in at the intensity of the Covenant attack as the battlecruiser continued to bombard the outer area of the city with a plasma bombardment.

"They're starting to glass the city," Mike reported grimly, trying to hold the craft steady as more shock waves buffeted the ship over the city of New Alexandria. "We've got to get these jammers or we're done."

Kat's voice cut in over the forbidding scene they were experiencing. "Noble Six, we're getting reports of Elites and Engineers trying to break into the Misriah Complex. Take them out."

"Copy," he responded then looked back at Natalia sitting in a gunner's seat.

She caught his look. "What?"

"Misriah Complex?" Mike stated questioningly.

"So what?" Natalia shot back testily. "It's one of my dad's buildings. There's soldiers in there who need our help. I could care less about my dad's stuff right now, okay? Our priority is to save this city."

"Sorry," Mike mumbled, chastising himself for the accusatory tone he'd used. He realized that in many ways he still was insecure about this growing relationship with the multi-billionaire's daughter. Yet her concern for the mission and not her father's property impressed

him. She seemed to have her head in the right place, now he needed to.

The Falcon neared the waypoint Kat had sent for them. The bold letters MISRIAH stood out on the richly appointed building causing Mike's heart to beat faster. "This is Spartan Noble Six and Noble Seven inbound to assist UNSC forces. How do you copy?"

"This is 4 Charlie 35, Six," a beleaguered voice responded with relief. "We got Elites all over our ass. They got Engineers so we can't break through. They've pushed us back to the upper level. We can't hold on much longer."

"Roger that. Hang tough 3-5, the cavalry is coming. We're less than one mike out. Meet us at the landing pad."

"Thanks Six, you saved us."

Mike could see the small party come out of cover their approach and set up a perimeter with Elites hard on their heels. "Cover fire! Give our boys cover fire!" He called to Natalia as he opened up with the Falcon's M638 Autocannon. The intensity of the Falcon's fire scattered the Elites who pulled back to cover, giving the craft the opportunity to land.

"This is going to be a hot insertion Tali, get ready," Mike called out.

"I'm with you all the way, Mike," she called back confidently.

The Spartan feathered the controls to start his landing sequence when an unfamiliar voice cut in on the overall channel for Noble Team.

"Noble Team this is Bravo Actual," a stern voice cut in using the call sign for the high command of the planet. "Be advised, you are ordered to proceed immediately to Extraction Point Lima-Seven. This is a Priority One mission override, do you copy, over?"

"What's up with that? Kat declared in irritation over the comms. "They can't just pull us off a mission like this. They're still jammers that we need to take out."

"Why don't we just pretend we didn't hear it," Emile joined in the conversation over the radio from their mission. "Hey, comms are cutting in and out, right?"

"Yea, we got a group of troopers in the thick of it," Mike added tersely. "We can't just leave them to it."

"Noble Lead, this is Bravo Actual awaiting confirmation of Priority One order, how do you copy, over?" the voice overrode their communications.

"Authorization code comes from HIGHCOMM," Commander Carter commented, trying to remain neutral. "We can't do that."

"Must be pretty important," Jun commented.

"No time to speculate," Carter declared over the private channel then

switched to the open channel. Copy Bravo Actual, order received. Noble Team is en route to Lima-Seven." Then switching back to the team channel declared, "Let's move Noble. Drop everything you're doing, I'm setting a waypoint to the extraction point. We rally there."

Mike slammed his hand into the console of the Falcon in frustration. He could see the UNSC troops holding the landing pad for them and he could also see the larger force of Elites massing to push them off of it. "4 Charlie 35, be advised, we have been pulled for a priority tasking, it's a no-go on the assist. I say again, no-go on the assist."

"Noble Six, we cannot hold this position," the leader of the beleaguered leader of the Army squad called back desperately. "We need your assist."

"Not my call 35, sorry."

"What's going on?" Natalia called out, having missed the conversation with Commander Carter.

"We're being pulled for another mission," Mike answered, pulling the Falcon out of its approach.

"We're just going to leave them?" the passionate woman responded incredulously, her voice breaking when she saw the looks of desperation on the faces of the troopers as the helicopter began to pull out.

"Nothing we can do about it. We received a priority mission override from high command. We can't disregard it," Mike answered through gritted teeth, every bone in his body screaming to finish what they had pledged to start but the Spartan training to obey kicking in.

Natalia said nothing but the condemnation for what they were about to do hung thick in the air as the waypoint popped up on their HUDs.

"Just because we can't land doesn't mean we can't help them as we're pulling out," Mike said more to himself as he watched the Covenant troops mass to overwhelm the small UNSC force. He thumbed the switch on the steering column to engage the nose-mounted autocannon. The Spartan jerked the column over sending the Falcon into a dive catching the surging Elites in the open. Mike let loose a torrential stream of armor piercing fire that ripped into the lead elements sending them reeling. Natalia caught on and opened fire from the open side-gunner's position as they passed by. Mike turned in a tight circle and came back for one more pass cutting down the remnant of the withdrawing force before setting his path on the course they'd been ordered.

"Hope this is bloody well worth it," he said to himself as he watched the Covenant reforming to attack anew, "because those poor sods aren't going to make it." Grim faced the conflicted Spartan set his eyes on the waypoint, trying to ignore the churning in his stomach, wishing he was still the Lone Wolf and didn't care so much.

32. Chapter 32

****Chapter 32****

****August 23, 2009hrs, New Alexandria, Planet Reach****

Despite the general chaos of the attack on New Alexandria and the attempt to evacuate the civilians, Noble Team made good time to the extraction point. They set up a perimeter but the fighting seemed to be away from this area so all was quiet, giving the team a welcome respite from the intensity of the fight. Whoever had picked the LZ had done well, it was out of the way and easy to secure. Commander Carter threw a green signal flare and they waited to see what was so important to take them off the critical task of restoring communications within the beleaguered UNSC forces.

Mike took the furthest point of the perimeter, wanting to be alone. The Spartan could still see the looks of the Army troopers as he told them he was leaving. The shock, disappointment and fear would be burned in his mind for some time to come.

This better be worth it, the Spartan thought to himself.

He heard someone come up beside him and knew instantly it was Natalia. She moved beside him silently, taking a knee in the grass of the abandoned playing field the extraction point was in.

They scanned the perimeter for several minutes before Natalia could bear the silence no longer and spoke. "You okay, Mike?" she asked gently, placing a gloved hand lightly on his shoulder.

Despite the armor encasing him he could feel the comfort of the touch and it helped. "I'm fine. I just can't get the image out of my mind of those guys we left behind to come here."

"I know what you mean. It broke my heart," the passionate woman admitted. "This better be worth it," she added, a note of anger in her voice.

Despite his training Mike turned from his post to look directly at the woman. She'd said the exact same thing he'd been thinking. That had two points of impact on him. First, it reminded him of the connection the two had. More and more they were thinking as one. But more importantly, she was definitely not thinking like some hack from ONI. The fact that she cared about a bunch of squaddies spoke volumes to her character. In that moment, he couldn't have loved her any more than he did.

"What?" Natalia asked, conscious Mike was staring at her despite both wearing their helmets.

The whine of a Pelican inbound caught the team's attention and broke the pair's moment. Each snapped back to the reality of the mission they were on.

Coming into view the aircraft's stealth grey paint let them know this was no ordinary transport. The ship flared then landed like a feather. The pilot kept the engines idling meaning this was not going to be a long interaction. The ramp dropped and two ONI security soldiers in black armor came trotting out and took up a covering

position. Scanning the area they made their own assessment of the safety despite the presence of Noble Team's defensive perimeter. After several irritating minutes for Noble one of the soldiers signaled back to the ship and a lean, sallow-faced man wearing an ONI officer's uniform with the rank of lieutenant walked briskly down the ramp.

The officer ignored Commander Carter who approached him as he looked around as if searching for something. Then he found Natalia kneeling beside Mike in a covering position on the flank.

"Miss Misriah," he called out, "you're to come with us, right now. We're getting you off Reach."

Natalia started at hearing her name as did the rest of the team at the unexpected nature of the mission. A sense of gridlock set in as the shock of the order caused the woman's brain to shut down.

"Excuse me?" Carter cut in, standing in the way of the ONI officer as he tried to step closer to the unmoving woman still in a crouch.

"This doesn't concern you, commander," the officer dismissed him surreptitiously despite being of lower rank brushing past the taller Spartan.

"Listen pal, you don't just pull us from a priority mission and then casually say you're taking one of my team members," the leader of Noble Team responded tensely moving back to obstruct the officer.

Emile slid over, shotgun cradled in his arms to stand beside his team leader, effectively blocking the ONI officer's way.

"Let me see your orders," Carter declared, taking his helmet off to stare down the smaller man.

"We have no time for this nonsense," the staff officer who still hadn't identified himself declared tersely but realized he couldn't bull through Noble Team. "The window of opportunity for safely leaving this city is closing. We need to leave now," he whined.

"And where does that leave the rest of the people in this city?" Carter asked

"Not my problem," the hard-faced man retorted coldly, regaining his composure and sense of superiority. "Miss Misriah, you have your orders. You need to get on the Pelican, now. We're to get you out of here."

All eyes turned to Natalia.

The passionate woman in red armor stood to her full height. She paused for a moment as if wrestling with the command. Then, as if she'd made up her mind, Natalia ripped the helmet off her head and with eyes blazing responded, "I'm not going anywhere."

"What?" the ONI responded, surprised at the answer. Then his eyes narrowed and he barked out, "Get on the Pelican, now!"

"No!" she shot back defiantly, folding her arms across her armored chest.

"You have your orders and you have no choice in the matter. Let's go." The officer darted past the two Spartans and grabbed Natalia's arm making as if to pull her to the ship.

Mike had been stunned at the turn of events. They'd left a group of Army troopers at the Misriah Complex to certain death for this? He'd been trained and conditioned to follow orders and he had so far. But there was more to this. He felt frozen, impotent, as the staff officer had ordered Natalia to leave them, to leave him, it suddenly occurred but then she'd said no.

Something shattered inside Mike B-312 and he wasn't about to stand around like the good little soldier anymore. He'd been used as the system saw fit for too many years, but no more. The Lone Wolf he'd been conditioned to be and then unleashed now took the initiative to independently assess the situation based on what he saw. No more would he be a puppet.

Though in another setting it would have been comical to watch the slender ONI officer trying to move the uncooperative woman in MOLNIR the aggressive act caused Mike to snap. "Hey, the lady said she doesn't want to go. Why don't you leave her alone?" Mike growled, slapping the man's arm away and stepping closer.

"Stand down Spartan, this is none of your business," the ONI officer ordered though gritted teeth, involuntarily stepping back while wincing in pain from the blow.

"You stand down!" Emile yelled, tired of the conversation, moving to stand between Natalia and the shuttle.

"Back off," one of the ONI security men snarled, stepping up and shoving Emile out of the way from behind.

The volatile Spartan came out of the stumble the unexpected push caused him with his kukri knife drawn.

The security man's Assault Rifle came up as the ONI officer's hand went for his sidearm and in an instant all of Noble Team had their weapons up and at the ready.

"Stand down," the officer screamed, retreating behind his two security men.

"Okay, everyone just calm down," Carter declared, stepping into the standoff to defuse the situation. Gesturing to his team to lower their weapons, he requested, "Come on, let's take it easy. We're all on the same side here."

"Are we?" Emile shot back angrily, waving his kukri in the direction of the trio from ONI.

"This isn't going to help anything. We're going to sort this out, I promise, but not this way." The declaration seemed to sooth the members of Noble Team though Natalia had moved under the protective arm of Mike. The commander shared his team's frustration but he

couldn't let it go there. Turning to the ONI officer, he declared, "I think I want to see your orders son or no one is going nowhere."

The Noble Team members responded reluctantly though the two ONI security soldiers didn't follow, instead keeping their weapons trained on Mike and Emile.

"Suit yourself," the ONI man responded curtly, rubbing his arm that Mike had slapped. Whipping a datapad out of a utility pocket he tapped the screen and handed it to the leader of Noble Team. "These orders come from CINCONI and are quite explicit and unequivocal. Lt. Commander Natalia Misriah is to be pulled from duty on planet Reach and evacuated off planet and back to Earth. Read it yourself."

All eyes turned to Natalia who dropped her helmet and grabbed hold of Mike's arm. "Please, don't let them make me go," she cried passionately, her eyes filling with tears. "I want to stay with the team—I want to stay with you Mike!"

Mike looked at Carter.

"There's nothing I can do about this, Six. This joker's right," Carter responded, handing the datapad back to the now smirking officer. "The orders are clear and specific. They come right from Bravo Six—that's ONI High Command as in Admiral Parangosky herself. We have no right to refuse them."

Mike looked at Natalia, unsure what to do. In the distance another skyscraper collapsed as the ground rumbled from the Covenant bombardment of the city. The city was lost, there was no hope anymore, and now the one thing that had been keeping him going was being taken from him too.

In an instant reality came crashing into Mike B-312, no, Mike Nantz's, recently constructed blissful world: he knew he wouldn't last. He'd been constructed as an expendable soldier. He'd defied the odds, his time was up but there was hope for Natalia. Instead of making him resentful he instead wanted to see her experience what he couldn't— a full and complete life, even if that meant leaving him here to die.

"Get on the shuttle, Tali," Mike said to her quietly.

The woman's eyes went as wide as saucers. "No! I want to stay with you. I want to fight."

"It's not your fight anymore."

"Then come with me," she said, desperate not to lose him. "I can make it work—I can make it right."

Mike shook his head even before she'd finished the statement and the woman's heart condemned her for even suggesting it but panic was taking over and she was losing control.

"I won't leave you Mike," she protested, clutching hold of the man for dear life.

The ground shook from another Covenant bombardment.

"Come on! We've got to go!" the ONI officer called out desperately. "Our window of opportunity is closing."

"Get on the damn shuttle, Tali!" Mike yelled.

No!" she screamed into his face, tears blurring her vision. "No, I won't go. I won't leave you, I won't."

"You have to," Mike yelled. "You have a family, a future. You have MacKenzie. I've got nothing. I'm expendable."

"Not to me!" the now hysterical woman screamed. "I love you and you love me. That's all that matters."

"Not anymore," Mike declared, tears filling his eyes. Then he grabbed Natalia and picking her up then walked towards the shuttle. Natalia thrashed wildly trying to get out of his grip but the man had her pinned and took her to the open door of the Pelican as the ONI officer sprinted in ahead of her to the ramp.

Mike walked her up the ramp then pried her arms away, blocking the entrance as the two training ONI security soldiers held the flailing woman in the bay.

"I love you Mike! I love you!" she screamed.

"I love you too," he whispered in return as the ramp closed and the idling Pelican began to take off. The pilot of the ship didn't wait for him to clear the wash of the ship and Mike didn't move. He was hit with a blast as the powerful shuttle took off. Sand and pebbles peppered his face but the force of the takeoff didn't move him. He stood there stock-still until it cleared the city and disappeared into the clouds taking her away from him.

Shoulders heaving and losing control of his body Mike walked over to a damaged building. With a primal scream that echoed throughout the park square that had served as the extraction point he punched his hand through a meter-wide concrete wall. It wasn't enough, overcome and lost, he fell to his knees crying openly at what had happened.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Yo man," Emile said quietly standing over him, "nothing you could do about it. It sucks but you did the right thing. She'll be safe now."

Mike nodded his head and loudly sucked in through his nose. He stood up shakily and Emile gave him an embrace.

"Shit," Carter swore as he rubbed his face in frustration. The leader of Noble Team had stood by and watched it all unfold. Politics had won out again. He clutched his fist, wanting to put it through a wall like Mike had but knowing he had to maintain control. His team hung on a thread and he needed to get them focused. "Listen up Noble," he called out. "There's still jammers in this city. We need to get back to work and do what we can so saddle up."

The leader of the team saw Mike was not moving as Emile and Jun reluctantly came back to life after the startling turn of events.

Kneeling down beside the broken Spartan he whispered, "Turn it into something useful, Six. I need you in this fight."

Mike turned towards Carter. Eyes red from crying he sniffed loudly, then just as he slammed the helmet back onto his head the leader of Noble Team saw the look of sadness in the man's granite grey eyes turn to one of cold rage.

As the ONI Pelican had taken off Natalia bolted for the ramp door, clawing wildly at it to get out but the pressure-sealed ramp had already locked in place.

"You bastards," the anguished woman screamed, beating her fists against the sealed exterior door as the dropship lifted off until they were bloody.

The security soldiers moved to the front end of the bay ignoring Natalia, their work done. The officer stayed near but kept a safe distance from the volatile woman, still angry at how the operation had gone though he was happy to be leaving the planet being overrun by Covenant.

"You have no right to do this. Do you know who my father is?" eyes blazing, Natalia challenged still wanting to return to the planet.

"Who do you think sent us?" the escorting officer retorted walking away to the cockpit leaving her alone with the indictment of his declaration.

33. Chapter 33

****Chapter 33****

****August 23, 2116hrs, New Alexandria****

Mike was in a fog of rage and heart-break. The despondent Spartan went mechanically through the rest of the operation working alone. Commander Carter had offered to ride with him but Mike declined, going back into Lone Wolf mode. More than the other emotions, he was confused by his feelings and needed time and distractions to sort them out. The Covenant were providing the distractions so all he needed was time to sort through the vast range of new emotions coursing within. The image of him carrying the kicking and screaming Natalia into the Pelican were burned in his memory. They replayed in his mind like some out-of-body experience in slow motion, every painful step towards the evac bird.

Mike knew she was safe as he watched the city burn from the vantage point of his Falcon's cockpit. Intellectually and tactically he knew it was the right thing, but he missed her already. His heart ached. It was like some kind of worm was burrowing deep into the vital organ and he could do nothing to get rid of it.

Steeling his nerves the Spartan tried to put it into another place, to lock it away. He would fight and he would purge these feelings.

Calls for help came and went as Mike systematically moved from one

hot spot to another. After a while it all became a blur.

"Mayday! Mayday! 7 Delta One-Niner to all UNSC forces!"

"What's your status, One-Niner?" Kat calmly responded, still managing the comms for Noble Team from the ONI headquarters on Reach at Olympic Tower in the center of the city.

"We found the jammer, but we're getting hit! Request immediate assistance! SinoViet Center is-arggh!" the panicked voice was lost in a squelch of white noise.

"Six, I'm uploading coordinates now," Kat called out urgently. "Get to SinoViet Center. Help those troopers if you can, but get that jammer offline either way."

And so it went.

Mike proceeded to the tactically important place and unleashed his fury on the Covenant attackers, a whirlwind of destruction and retribution. He thirsted for revenge and found it. So after assisting and taking another jammer off-line the calls kept coming in.

"4 Charlie 27 to Command, request immediate assistance! We're at the Vyrant Telecom Tower! Got Hunters between us and the jammer!"

"Copy, 2-7 - help is on the way," Kat coolly responded. "Noble Six, I'm sending coordinates for the Vyrant tower. Go get those Troopers unstuck."

Eventually Mike didn't even hear Kat's voice, it all blended together in the haze he was feeling.

"1 Alpha 3 to Command: Covvies got us pinned down on a rooftop. We need help, pronto! Uploading the waypoint, over."

"This is Foxtrot 2-1, on the DNBM Financial Tower! Is anybody out there?"

"Golf 2-7 to HQ: we're on the Jotun building, got Banshees all over us!"

"7 Charlie 4-0 to HQ, we've got incoming hostiles on top of the Mainz Tr  nger building. Requesting immediate assistance!"

"Whiskey 3-9, requesting immediate assistance!"

On and on it went until the jammers were off-line.

"Noble Two to Noble Leader. All Jammers are down," Kat confirmed, a note of relief in her voice.

"Solid copy, Noble Two," Carter acknowledged. "New orders: all personnel are to be evacuated from ONI HQ. Confirm, over."

"Confirm, ONI tower evacu- oh!" Kat's voice was suddenly cut off as the sound of a massive explosion overrode the dialogue.

"Noble Two! Noble Two, sitrep!" Carter called out urgently.

"Covvies are hitting the tower in force!" Kat responded desperately. "They must have zeroed my signal!"

"Get that evac started!" Noble Lead ordered.

"Roger that. Noble Six, get over here and cover our evac Pelicans," Noble Two called to Mike. "I need you overhead, now!"

Mike needed no reference by this point. The Olympic Tower was a prominent feature in the city and easy to spot. Rising 2,250 meters into the sky the jutting office complex had been the headquarters of the ONI branch on Reach and a number of other prestigious corporations. Pushing his Falcon to the limit he got there in short order.

"Command, this is Whiskey 35," the pilot of one of the Pelican dropships trying to rescue the remaining people from the tall tower called out, "I've got eyes on six long range Shade turrets in the vicinity of the ONI tower. Making life pretty hard on our evac birds."

"Copy, Whiskey 35. Noble Six, take out those enemy Shades," Kat confirmed.

Mike took a quick scan of the area using his IFF and then began to move in to systematically destroy the dangerous anti-air turrets. One by one he was able to eliminate the deadly Shades but without the satisfaction he'd received earlier from the face-to-face kills he'd made. The Spartan found himself growing tired, an unusual phenomenon for the supersoldier but the emotions of the day had a draining effect on him. All he wanted to do was finish the job and be with the rest of the team.

Flying in and out of the fire from the lethal turrets that were now focusing on him the Lone Wolf took them out one by one despite getting hit several times. Falcon smoking from a fire in the rear of the fuselage, Mike was unmoved and continued with the mission. And as with the jammers Mike systematically eliminated the threat in short order.

"Whiskey 37, you're cleared to proceed," Kat reported to the evac Pelican.

"Solid copy, Command," the relieved pilot acknowledged. "We appreciate the help."

"Whisky 35 and 36, you're clear as well," Kat called out to the other two Pelicans stacking up to join the first one. As the two birds acknowledged the good news and flew in to gather the remaining refugees and troops to pull out she turned back to Mike. "Noble Six, you are one steely-eyed Spartan. I'm extending the vertical landing platform. Come home, lieutenant."

Mike could see the small private landing pad slide out from the angular building and the red landing lights begin flashing so nosed his now-burning Falcon down for a bumpy landing. The Spartan moved into the luxuriously appointed floor he'd landed on, conscious of the value it must have cost to build and yet the signs of destruction from attack were everywhere. Perhaps it was thinking of Natalia but he took a grim satisfaction that war was an equalizer of wealth. That

is unless you had access to Navy ships, he reminded himself.

The Lone Wolf walked into the area the rest of Noble Team had set up on. The two story office area has a full height glass window that commanded a view of the city. At one point it would have been some sight. Now, it only reinforced what all knew was going on. The top of the window was broken and a crashed Banshee lay tangled in a pile of cables, testimony to the intensity of the recent fight for the key building.

Mike saw Kat squatting down on the floor working on fixing a comm unit, her helmet beside her. Jun was sitting on a desk in an overwatch position scanning the city with a pair of binoculars. Emile lounged against a side wall, sharpening his Kukri while Commander Carter stood away from the team against the far wall.

"Look at this place. Used to be the crown jewel," Jun reflected to himself as he scanned the now empty skies for threats. "Not anymore." Then he noticed Mike had entered the room and added, "Hey, you made it."

"It's a regular family reunion," Emile deadpanned.

Mike snorted but said nothing. The loss of Natalia became overwhelming anew with the lack of action and suddenly he began to see his teammates in a different light. The Spartan silently reached into his utility pouch and pulled Jorge's dog tags out, letting them dangle from his hand as an offering.

Emile picked up the intent immediately but did not accept it. "Keep 'em. He gave them to you." The volatile Spartan then pointed at himself with his kukri and declared, "I'll honor him my own way."

"Jorge always said he would never leave Reach," Jun commented thoughtfully.

"The big man was sentimental," Emile added with a sardonic laugh.

"He gave his life thinking he just saved the planet," Commander Carter interjected, his eyes dark with fatigue. "We should all be so lucky."

The reflective leader of Noble Team walked away from the conversation and towards Jun who was still looking out the window.

After a moment of awkward silence the team's sniper asked, "Sir, that true about Gauntlet, Red and Echo Teams assigned to civilian evac ops?" mentioning other Spartan teams on the planet.

Carter turned testily towards Kat, knowing the source of the information. "Those are senior-level communiques..."

"I hear what I hear," Kat answered the implied accusation. "Point is, why put Spartans on defensive deployments?"

Carter refused to answer the question, having the same thoughts as the rest of his team so tried to change the subject. "I need that link to SATCOM, Kat."

"Chasing it, but this console has more shrapnel than transceivers... You didn't answer my question," Kat went back to the previous conversation, not letting it go.

"You want to know if we're losing?" the leader of Noble Team asked looking out at a nearby skyscraper burn.

"I know we're losing," Kat declared. "I want to know if we've lost."

Carter looked out the window again, unsure how to answer, knowing what he should say as their commander but feeling the same things they were as a fellow Spartan. He sighed heavily, not sure what to say when beeping and static from the comms broke out.

"It's Colonel Holland. He's hailing us!" Kat confirmed, now all professional and efficient. "What's he doing on an open channel?"

"Let's hear it," Carter ordered.

Though filled with static it was clearly the voice of Noble Team's handler coming over the comms. "â€|near the southwest quadrant of the city, over? Sierra Two-Five-Nine, if you are receiving, I am authorizing override of radio security protocols to link with this channel."

"How long for a secure link?" Commander Carter asked, weighing the risk to them of responding but knowing he had to.

"I can't guarantee secure anymore," Kat answered grimly.

"Could the Covenant trace it to us?"

"I could," Kat declared.

"Noble Leader, this is a Priority One hail," Colonel Holland called out again. "If you are receiving, acknowledge immediately."

"What?" Kat exclaimed. "Another priority hail? What's up now?"

Yea, the last one went so well," Emile interjected wryly, thinking of their visit with the ONI Pelican that took Natalia away.

"Stow it," Carter overrode them. "Bring him up."

Kat reluctantly handed their team leader the communicator's ear piece but added, "Keep it brief."

"Carter here," he acknowledged and began to listen.

As the leader of Noble focused on their commander Jun noticed something in his binoculars and leaned forward to get a better view catching the attention of everyone else in the room.

"We've got movement," Noble Three reported. "Multiple Covenant vehicles vacating the area... and they're in a hurry."

"How often do you see Covenant retreat for no reason?" Emile

wondered, walking over to see for himself.

Kat though stayed with her equipment and changed the settings, fearing what this meant. "Radiation flare! Big! Forty million roentgens!" she called out urgently.

"Just lost Holland. What's going on?" Carter asked coming over to look at what Kat was watching.

"Atomic excitement scrambled the signal," Noble Two reported. "Ninety million now!"

"Source?" Carter asked, fearing the answer.

"Airborne. Close!" Kat responded, her voice rising with anxiety.

"How close?"

Before the leader of Noble Team's question could be answered a blinding flash of white light filled the room through the large window and a moment later a massive shockwave shattered the thick plate glass sending thousands of shards of glass flying through the air.

"That close," Kat yelled back as the wind howled through the floor from the shattered window.

Covenant ships had begun glassing the nearby area. The shockwaves threw the Noble Team members to the ground. As pressure waves forced air into the building the Spartans got back on their feet, while Kat put her helmet back on. The team ran towards two elevators at the other end of the room. Arriving, Carter, Emile and Jun took one while Kat and Mike the other.

Kat tried to close the elevator door but missed the button the first time being partially blinded by the explosion but she got it on the second try, sending the elevator rushing down the building.

"First glassing?" Kat asked, calming down after the unexpected event. Mike nodded his head in agreement but said nothing, still shaken himself. "Me too." She took her helmet off and removed some glass from her hair. "Don't worry, I'm on it. Our best option is a fallout bunker in Sublevel 2. Ninety-six meters northeast." Looking at Mike her eyes displayed a sympathy he'd never seen in the aggressive Spartan before. "Hey, sorry about what happened with Natalia. For what it's worth, I liked her."

"Thanks," Mike mumbled, still stunned from the glassing and drained by the emotions of the day.

"No, I mean it," she continued. "You hold onto those good thoughts man. We Spartans don't get a lot of those," the woman declared sincerely.

Mike nodded his head in agreement as the words sunk in. "You're right."

Kat jammed the helmet on her head as if to hide a note of embarrassment at the display of emotion so switched topics as the

elevator neared the bottom of the tower. "We get orders from Holland, sir?"

"We're being redeployed to Sword Base," Carter reported over the comms from the other elevator.

"Sword? Covenant own it now!" Jun interjected.

"Which is why they want us for a torch and burn op," Carter responded. "Keep Dr. Halsey's excavation data from falling into enemy hands."

"If it hasn't already," Kat retorted.

The elevator door carrying the first three members of Noble Team down opened and the trio sprinted across the opening towards the fallout shelter door.

The elevator carrying Mike and Kat opened and he could see his three comrades nearing the entrance to their refuge. Debris and glass littered the ceramic tile floor and while the power was off in the now-abandoned office tower moonlight flooded in from the destroyed glass ceiling that had once brought light into the atrium area.

The two rushed out as Carter responded to Kat's earlier statement. "Maybe, but according to Holland, the Covenant are still hunting for something," the leader of Noble Team declared as he reached for the door.

As Mike and Kat crossed the center of the foyer she fumed, "Where does he get off calling a demolition op Priority One?"

Her voice was cut off mid-sentence as a distinct hiss ripped the air as a Covenant Needle round pierced the woman's helmet and came through her faceplate. Mike instinctively looked up as Kat's body limply fell into his arms. The weight and shock caused him to buckle as he saw a Covenant Phantom overhead and an Elite with a Needle Rifle leaning out an open bay. In one motion he instinctively drew her holstered pistol and opened fire despite the shock and disbelief of the moment. The other three members of the team sprinted over to assist, hammering away at the Covenant attacker with their Assault Rifles.

Clip empty, Mike threw the pistol away taking no satisfaction from the sight of the Elite sniper falling to his death from the Phantom after being hit. The shocked Spartan began to drag the lifeless body towards the shelter entrance as the other three provided cover fire.

"Come on! Come on, get in!" Carter yelled as they fell back towards the open door.

"Let's go! Come on!" Jun added urgently, emptying his clip.

Mike moved into the opening and lay her down gently as the others piled into the area, closing the thick blast door behind them. He ripped off her helmet ignoring the damage to her face from the Needle round and fumbled to get a Biofoam canister out.

"It's too late Six, she's gone," Carter commented as he looked at

Noble Two's lifeless body.

"Shit!" Emile screamed pounding on the reinforced steel wall repeatedly with his fist. "Shit!"

Mike ignored everything around him, working furiously to try to bring Kat back to life, willing her to breathe again, ignoring the reality of what he could see right in front of his eyes.

"How? How'd that happen?" Emile stammered, anger and shock evident. "Single round through the helmet? Not possible."

"Glassing causes an electro-magnetic pulse. It fries our shields," Jun explained quietly as he came over to Mike and put a hand on his shoulder. "You got to let her go brother," he whispered, "its over."

"No! It's not!" Mike choked, "we can bring her back. I can fix this!" Losing control of his emotions but even as he protested Mike felt his body going limp and he slumped to the floor sobbing uncontrollably.

None of the remaining members of Noble Team thought any worse of him; they were not far behind in their own emotions as many tears began to fall at the reality lying before them.

****August 23 2237hrs, New York City, Planet Earth****

"They've got her, sir," MacKenzie Wainwright confirmed, a look of relief on his handsome face as he put down the comlink that he'd just received the good news on.

Spanner Misriah sighed audibly, allowing himself the momentary display of weakness in front of his junior executive.

"What now?" MacKenzie asked the multi-billionaire industrialist.

"I bring my daughter home. She's had enough playing soldier," the powerful man declared firmly. "It's time for her to move on with her life and stop this foolishness."

"What about the admiral?" Natalia's suitor asked, a note of anticipation in his voice. "Won't she object?"

"Leave that to me," the determined industrialist retorted. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement. Alert my pilot to prep my yacht for travel. We're going to Sydney."

"Why leave now sir? It'll take them likely five days to get back with the Cole Protocol jumps they'll need to make."

Misriah snorted at the naïve executive. "As if ONI follows something as pedestrian as the Protocol. They'll be back in less than three and I want to be there. Plus, we have work to do if things are starting to shape up like it looks like they are. There's no time to waste," Misriah responded, his voice going cold. "Nicolo," he called to his personal AI.

"Here, my lord," the Smart AI dressed as a Renaissance gentleman responded, appearing over the lacquered desk.

"I have something I need you to do for me," the powerful man declared, his eyes narrowing.

****August 23, time unknown, UNSC Prowler **_**Dusk**_**, in clandestine orbit over Planet Reach****

The sound of the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight engine of the stealth-equipped corvette coming to life signaled that the ONI ship would soon be making the jump to slipspace for the trip back to Earth. Natalia sat alone on the floor in a comfortably equipped stateroom, her damaged hands bandaged.

Who do you think sent us?

The words haunted Natalia who'd cried and screamed herself into exhaustion as she replayed her extraction from Reach again and again in her mind.

Who do you think sent us?

Of course it was her father. Who else would have done that? Certainly not Admiral Parangosky. _I'm nothing more than a commodity to her_ Natalia thought. _Another pawn_.

No, Spanner Misriah, the most powerful industrialist on Earth, had arranged to get her off. No one else, just her. The others left to their fate, but not Spanner Misriah's daughter. No, he'd reached across the galaxy and plucked her from danger.

Spoiled little rich girl.

The words both taunted and haunted her.

34. Chapter 34

****Chapter 34****

****August 26, 2552 03:00 Hours ****New Alexandria, Planet Reach****

Mike lost track of time holed up in the hardened blast shelter deep in the ground underneath Olympic Tower. Despite the protection the fallout bunker offered they could still feel vibrations caused by the Covenant glassing the sprawling metropolis. They had emergency rations and water was available in the shelter but everything tasted like sawdust to the broken Spartan. First Natalia's sudden departure and then the senseless death of Kat. For one who'd cheated the grim reaper so many times and in so many ways this was just galling. A single Needle Round in the headâ€¦a shield system down due to an EMP pulseâ€¦the man seethed in silence.

The others talked little. Commander Carter took the sensor device Kat had used to measure the radiation level, looking for signs the Covenant had completed their business and it was safe to go out. The leader of Noble Team knew the remaining members of his team needed action, needed to get back into the action, needed payback. But they sat there, hour upon hour, waiting, tension growing.

Mike was not the only one suffering silently. Emile sharpened his Kukri knife to a razors edge then proceeded to carve idly into the permacrete foundation of the shelter until his knife was dull then would sharpen it again and repeat. Jun would take a magazine from his sniper rifle and with a rhythmic _click click click_ would unload it and reload it. Each dealt with their grief in a different way.

Kat's body was covered in a Mylar blanket in the corner. The round had fused going through her head so there was no blood. Several times in the first hours Mike had gone over, pulled the blanket back and hoped she would open her eyes, give him that look, and then shoot out a wise crack. But she never opened her eyes and she never got up. He wanted it, he willed it, but then he also had wanted to be with Natalia.

He was taken back to their time together training at Camp Curahee on Onyx and it was yet another one who was gone and he remained. He could have died so many times, should have died so many times. And as he thought about it there were so many times he'd wanted to die and yet he lived. Jorge and now Kat; it was too much.

Gratefully, the interment of Noble Team finally came to an end after three days.

"Radiations dropping," Commander Carter reported quietly, no emotion in his voice, "Five million roentgens and falling."

No one said anything as Noble's leader tried to open a channel to the outside world. "Any station, this is Noble Lead, do you read, over."

Much to their surprise a voice responded almost immediately. "Noble Lead this is Foxtrot 3-5," the voice of the Pelican pilot came back with a note of surprise, "what is your status, over?"

"Operational but in need of immediate extraction, over."

"We can accommodate thatâ€¦"

A harsh but familiar voice cut in. "Noble One this is Noble Actual, how do you copy?"

"Loud and clear."

Holland got right to the point. "What's your count, over."

Carter's face hardened at the blunt question from the colonel. "Four effectives, sir."

Holland paused for a moment, as if allowing the number to soak in. "Understood. Confirm ID's of remaining effectives Noble One."

Carter took a breath and began. "A-266, A-239, B-312 and A-259," the commander finished with his own ID.

"Misriah I heard about from command, but Kat?" their handler responded in surprise, breaking radio protocol.

"Gone sir. Sniper round."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks sir."

"Noble One, I need a straight no BS answer," Holland responded after a short pause. "Are you able to continue with your mission?"

Emile let out a low growl at the implication of the question.

Carter looked at the others but couldn't ask the question.

"Hell yea," Emile spat out as Mike and Jun leapt to their feet in agreement.

"Roger that sir, we're good to go, all we need is a ride," Carter acknowledged.

"Good to hear son," Holland answered. "We have a new staging area where we'll get you fit out and on your way. I'll send a waypoint to Foxtrot 3-5."

It seemed like it was time to get back into the war. The period of wallowing in self-pity was over and time for action was at hand. Mike, for one, couldn't wait. Any more inactivity and he'd crack.

Commander Carter unsealed the thick blast door and opened it. They all paused, looking at Kat's body under the blanket. Without saying a word the leader of Noble Team went over and gently picked up their dead team member and cradling her in his arms walked out of the shelter and up the emergency stairs to ground level.

Each braced, unsure of what they'd find, preparing for attack but instinctively knowing there would be none. The Covenant had done their job and left. Noble team arrived at the Atrium of shell of the building and walked into the early morning light of near dawn. Ash and soot still filled the air as dark clouds caused by the violence of the plasma bombardment continued to swirl and choke out any light. The Spartans looked around at the ground which had been turned into a shiny, almost reflective, molten surface.

"Damn," Emile exhaled as the others took in the horror of what once had been a thriving city.

Though almost beautiful for its geological structure the results of the glassing of New Alexandria caused a sense of horror and finality within the supersoldiers they'd not felt before.

The shrill whine of a Pelican inbound could be heard though their extraction ship couldn't be seen. Jun pulled out a signal flare and threw it where their landing zone would be.

Carter took Kat's body and carefully lay it by the LZ and then walked over to where Mike had knelt down and was examining the glassy lechatelierite surface.

Mike watched him come and braced for the inevitable question.

"You up for this, Six?" Carter asked pointedly though with empathy in his voice. "You've been through a lot and I want you to know

thatâ€|"

Mike didn't let him finish. "Don't worry about me. I'll get the job done."

Carter saw a glint of hardness come into the granite grey eyes of the Spartan and knew the Lone Wolf was back as the Pelican flared to take them away from the destroyed city.

****August 27, 1015 hours, 2552, Sydney, Planet Earth****

The traveling business executive's nose was buried in his datapad preparing to depart Earth for his upcoming meeting on Mars. He'd been in the executive lounge at the Sydney Spaceport dozens of times so had the steps memorized. So as a result he didn't see the wall of a man standing in his way until a beefy hand in the center of his chest sent the slender executive sprawling embarrassingly to the ground.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the wealthy man shot out, leaping angrily to his feet.

"Lounge is closed, move on," the burly dark-haired man in a tailored suit growled unapologetically.

"Give me a break. This is the executive lounge. It's not closed to executive class travelers like me," the businessman declared anger flaring, used to getting his way. He took a step forward and watched the man block the doorway. Over his shoulder he saw two more equally-sized men in suits with earpieces and behind them he caught a glimpse of the reason the lounge was closed. It was a face he'd seen on the cover of Forbes magazine recently.

Spanner Misriah.

Sighing forlornly, the humbled executive accepted philosophically the declaration of where he stood on the corporate pecking order and walked away without a word looking for the public lounge.

The face of Misriah Armory had arrived several hours earlier in his luxuriously appointed yacht complete with MacKenzie Wainwright, two of his executive assistants and three former ODST bodyguards. The foremost private lounge in the spaceport was already cleared by four spaceport security officers by the time he set up there and so waited for his daughter. The trip from New York had gone by comfortably in the man's fast and well-appointed yacht though he's used the time to set in motion a series of maneuvers based on information he'd received. With his daughter safely out of harm's way the pragmatic billionaire's focus had already shifted to a new priority.

Natalia had finally arrived earlier from their slipspace jump from Reach in the morning at Sydney Station, nicknamed Kangaroo Court, for the transfer to Earth. One of 300 Orbital Defense Platforms guarding Earth, the massive space station was nearly 1 1/2km long but not so large that when the ONI Prowler Dusk arrived word had not been relayed by an agent to the powerful executive waiting for his daughter.

With the United Nations Space Command formal headquarters located in the Australian city the location had not only a large modern space

station capable of receiving interplanetary traffic it also had an Orbital Defense Platform in geosynchronous orbit above to facilitate interstellar travel and localized planetary defense. All of these things were familiar but now lost on the tormented woman. Her mind and heart were millions of light years behind on Reach. The shock of the sudden and unexpected extraction had passed but the image hadn't. The team had accepted her, Mike loved her. For the first time she'd earned something on her own. Her name had not helped her, it had been a liability with the Spartans of Noble Team and yet she'd been able to earn the respect of the supersoldiers and the love of the legendary Lone Wolf, Mike Nantz. The experience had been both intoxicating and liberating. She'd never felt more alive. And now she was about to be dropped back into Sydney and her old life. As confused as Natalia Misriah was she knew she wasn't ready for that.

MacKenzie paced back and forth nervously. His perceptive employer had shot him several irritated glances but it had done nothing but increase the anxiety of the handsome man. Once the elation of Natalia's safe rescue from the growing chaos on Reach had been confirmed the quick-minded man began to analyze what had been going on the last month. _Has it only been about six weeks since we last saw each other?_ The man couldn't believe it. Natalia had seemed to be gone for a lifetime. He had strong feelings for her, he even likely loved her. But theirs was a complicated relationship. He did know that after she'd landed on Reach he'd not heard from her. Still, based on his information, the Covenant attack had started right around them. Yet he'd messaged her several times over the past few days and heard nothing back. That caused the confident man to wonder. He caught a look at his reflection in the smoked glass wall separating the lounge from the walkway and liked what he saw, as did two attractive young women heading to a departure gate who stared at him walking past. No, once she was back everything would go back to the way it was before, he assured himself. The man's communication's device warbled, signaling the call he'd been waiting for.

"Natalia's shuttle has left Sydney Station and is on its way here," MacKenzie reported to the billionaire industrialist who was preoccupied with his datapad. Seeing he was being ignored the young executive added, "Captain Iglesias also added she's in a pretty foul mood."

"Whatever," Misriah snorted. "At least she's here. We have more important things to concern ourselves with now." He fixed the ambitious young man with a hard look. "So where do we stand?"

"Everyone has been alerted sir and things are beginning to get into motion," MacKenzie reported.

"But quietly, correct?" the man responded, a thin note of malice in his voice.

"Yes sir, as ordered."

"Good." Spanner Misriah seemed to relax a little bit and allowed himself to sit back into the thick leather chair he was holding court.

"Mr. Misriah," the head of his security detail interrupted, listening

to a report coming through his earpiece, "your daughter's shuttle has just arrived at gate 116. Spaceport security is clearing it now so we can head there when you're ready."

Misriah didn't reply for a moment, finishing the message he was typing on his datapad. Then he closed the device and stood up to his full 6' 4" height. "Excellent. Let's go welcome my daughter home."

Natalia watched the sprawling city of Sydney coming closer by the moment out the window of the shuttle she was returning in. The ONI officer has stripped out of her MJOLNIR armor at the station and was wearing a set of ONI crew coveralls causing her to suddenly feel very vulnerable despite her size and athleticism. The sensitive woman couldn't help but compare the pristine and prosperous city with the wreckage she'd left in New Alexandria. No one even knows she thought to herself. Too busy going about their meaningless lives to care until it impacts them directly she added. The ONI officer knew she would be returning to Sydney since that was where Bravo-Six, the HIGHCOM headquarters was housed and she'd be expected to give a report. The thought of talking about what she'd experienced to those who would impassively listen sickened her. She felt worse as she recalled the dozens of times she'd been on the other end of similar debriefings, judging the emotional people on the other end of the conversation. Much had changed for her. Once again, she wondered how Mike and the others were doing. She knew she should be thinking about what she'd share but couldn't bring herself to do it. She just didn't care anymore.

Plus she knew they would be there. They as in her father and MacKenzie. Her stomach churned at the thought of the reunion she knew as coming. He'd be there even though he shouldn't even know about her arrival but who was she kidding. She knew her father had orchestrated this so he'd know and he'd be there. Also, MacKenzie would be there too and she didn't know what to do with him. She hadn't turned on her datapad since she'd last turned it off on arriving at Reach. She could only imagine how worried he'd been about her and how many messages there would be from him. What could she do? Deep in thought Natalia almost missed the shuttle pilot's announcement that they were preparing to land.

Misriah's bodyguards and staff formed a cordon in the empty arrivals gate creating a buffer zone for the reunion although MacKenzie was only two steps away from the father.

Natalia felt the shuttle land and heard a gentle hiss as the walkway was extended. She sat there, willing the ship to take off and take her back to the space station but knew she had to face this. With a deep breath she stood up and prepared for what was to come.

The door slide open from the walkway to the arrival gate and Spanner Misriah was impressed by what he saw. Though his daughter seemed like she'd lost some weight there was a confidence in her step he'd not seen before. Despite all her accomplishments the shrewd man had known of his daughter's hidden insecurities. He was pleased to see the time in combat had seemed to do her good. Already his quick mind was figuring how best to use this new development.

Natalia stopped at the threshold for a moment, taking in the scene. The gate area was empty save for her father and MacKenzie. Spanner

Misriah looked like he was assessing her, as if he were judging the results of an investment. MacKenzie just looked at her eagerly. Bile welled up in her stomach and she began to feel sick.

"Natalia, you look well," her father came up. He put both hands on her shoulders, gazing at her intently. "It seems like you're no worse for wear after your little adventure."

"Yes, father, I'm fine thank you," she responded woodenly, arms stiffly at her side.

Then MacKenzie swooped in. "Tali! I'm so glad you're back and okay." He hugged her then moved in for a kiss when Natalia snapped out of her funk.

"Don't even think about that!" she spat back pushing him away at the same time, her fiery personality coming out.

"Natalia!" her father barked as MacKenzie stumbled back from the push in shock.

"No," she shot back, not allowing her father to speak. "No, you will not lecture me on this. You had no right to pull me off of Reach."

"Oh come on Natalia. You've just come back from a long and stressful trip. You're tired. Why don't you get changed and we can get something nice to eat?"

"Did you hear what I just said?" Natalia shot back, incredulous at how her father had deflected her statement. "I said you had no right to interfere with my mission."

"Calm down. I heard you the first time Natalia. And fighting the Covenant was never your mission. You're not trained or qualified to be in that kind of situation. You should have been pulled sooner if anyone had a brain there."

"You don't know," Natalia countered, stung by the assessment of her abilities. "I proved myself there! I belonged."

"What? With a bunch of Spartans? Come on," Spanner Misriah snorted, unimpressed.

"How dare you talk about them like that! They're the best people I've ever met," she shot back, voice rising.

"Come on Natalia. Let's leave and we can talk about this later," MacKenzie interjected smoothly, trying to be an intermediary. "You've been through so much. It really is incredible."

"Why don't you stay out of this?" Natalia's eyes blazed at her would-be suitor. "Don't patronize me. It's none of your business. You don't know anything about this."

The handsome young executive shrunk back in horror, never having been talked to in that way before.

"That was not called for," her father cut in.

"Well neither was any of this..like you interfering in an operation. You even showing up here before I called. None of it."

"I'm concerned about you and didn't want to see you get hurt," her father replied, showing the wound he felt.

"And what about the others left behind?" Natalia pressed in, uninterested in her father's feelings.
>"They're not my concern, you are," he responded with an edge to his voice.<p>

"We were right in the middle of an important operation when I was pulled out. My team needed me." Natalia's eyes began to well up, overwhelmed with emotions that were beginning to crash through the barriers she'd put up.

"They're not your team. You were never to get anywhere close to real combat!" Spanner Misriah yelled, losing his cool and control of the situation as he saw people starting to stop and watch the battle of wills which embarrassed and angered him.

Natalia's retort hung limp on her lips as the reality of what should have been in her father's eyes hit her like a hammer.

"How touching," Admiral Margaret Parangosky sniffed, watching the awkward exchange from an upper level of the arrivals area of the spaceport. In contrast to Spanner Misriah and his entourage the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence and therefore the most powerful woman in the UNSC, had shown up with only her executive assistant, Captain Serin Osman. But then that was why she there in the first place-to make a point. With a nod of her white-haired head she signaled it was time to announce their arrival. By the time the pair moved from their vantage point and travelled to the gateway the father and daughter were yelling at each other.

"Perfect," Admiral Parangosky purred. "Come Captain Osman. It's time to refocus this event."

"Stop trying to run my life!" Natalia screamed, livid that her father had no sensitivity to what she was feeling or interest in her side of the story. Equally frustrating was MacKenzie who stood limply to the side deferring to her father.

"Lieutenant Commander Misriah, that is about enough."

The softly spoken yet firm words, barely heard above the argument and general buzz of spaceport froze Natalia and her father in place. Both turned to watch a small woman over 90 years old and with a slight bend in her back and shoulders join their group. It was not the trim ONI officer uniform the woman wore or even the admiral's rank regalia on it. It was the who; a woman known for being powerful and deadly, whose personal motto was 'strength through paranoia'.

"Natalia, welcome back. I trust you had an agreeable trip," Parangosky greeted her pleasantly but without affection, then turned to the reticent woman's father. "Spanner," she nodded in acknowledgment.

No one said anything; even Misriah's burly bodyguards seemed to shrink away from the elderly woman which appeared to amuse her.

"I wanted to come personally and welcome you back," the admiral continued but I don't want to interrupt so I'll get right to it. I want you at the Hive at 1400 hours to be debriefed; do you understand me, Lieutenant Commander?" Parangosky ordered bluntly.

Despite the fact Natalia towered over the petite, white haired woman she shrunk back in intimidation. "Yes ma'am, understood," she replied, avoiding the admiral's penetrating stare.

"And you will speak to no one about what's going on until then either," Parangosky looked pointedly at Spanner Misriah as she said it.

Natalia nodded her head in agreement but said nothing, looking down at the tile floor, feeling once again like a helpless child. It was a long way from Reach.

"Good. Then I'll allow you to continue your little family reunion. Enjoy." Point made, Parangosky turned nimbly and walked away, with Captain Osman in tow leaving the others uncertain how to proceed.

"Well that was fun," Black Box commented as the featureless box-shaped Smart AI appeared out of nowhere to hover beside the admiral.

"It always is," Parangosky replied with a smirk.

35. Chapter 35

****Chapter 35****

****August 29, 2552 16:16 Hours,** **2552,** **Sword Base, Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Eposz, Planet Reach****

Mike wanted to work alone so had jumped at the chance of opening the way for the others after the initial assessment of how to go in had been made. The pain in his heart from allowing people to get close to him and then be torn away was too much. He felt embarrassed by what he'd done as Natalia was leaving, hoping she'd remember him by it when the token act was discovered. But then he figured she'd forget him and move on since she was out of the war zone.

It had taken the remnants of Noble Team better than a day to get to the new staging area. While the Covenant were glassing large parts of Reach it was by no means complete. The invaders still seemed to be looking for something since ground forces continued to pour in from above making it difficult on the ever-shrinking human forces to move around. Still, Noble had made it and after gearing up had been given some rest and then set out before first light for the Babd Cath Ice Shelf. Again, a trip that should have only taken two hours had taken nearly eleven. Still, they were here and finally in a position to fight instead of run. Mike didn't much like the nature of the mission. A torch and burn wasn't what he was looking for right now but still, he'd get to kill Covenant and that suited him fine. Plus, he could begin to slip back into the Lone Wolf mode.

No, Mike wanted to be alone and he wanted to fight. Images of Jorge

and Kat haunted him. They were both gone. He got that, it was war. But then he'd allowed his heart to be touched by Natalia. Now he cursed himself for the weakness.

The landscape around Sword Base was a picture of burned destruction, even relative to the time he'd been here last a few weeks ago. He and a three man ODST team had been dropped as an advance party behind a series of small hills leading to the base. Taking the point the Spartan aggressively led his teams towards the objective several kilometers away, irritated he still couldn't get alone. They made quick time, finding no Covenant thus far though the signs of battle were everywhere.

Mike left the three ODST's in a defilade at the bottom of one of the rocky hills and ranged forward a bound to get the lay of the land. Moving back down the first hill the rocky terrain forced him to pay attention in order to move stealthily. Wanting to be alone with his thoughts the voice of Colonel Holland coming over the team channel was an unwelcome annoyance.

"Noble One, this is Noble Actual. Noble One?"

"Go ahead," Commander Carter responded over the net.

"We need that base taken out, son," Holland reminded them though he'd told them the same thing at their last briefing earlier in the morning. It was unlike the seasoned combat veteran to be so jumpy. "What's your status?" There was something definitely not right with their handler.

"Still outside," Carter reported. "Thermal on the interior shows standing-room-only. We're gonna have to thin 'em out or we'll be way too popular."

"Copy that, Noble One. Holland out."

Mike continued to ponder why they'd received this call, scouting around some large boulders for Covenant advance parties but the way was clear.

"We've got a job to do, so let's stay focused and get it done. Six, are you in position?" Carter asked, wondering too about the call from their commander..

"Affirmative," Mike responded curtly, wondering what all the chatter was about as he returned to the ODST's.

"Good. Execute," Carter ordered.

Mike took a deep breath then hand signaled the advance, eager to get into action and allow his quick mind to focus on something else.

"Covenant own this sector now," Commander Carter reported the results of their aerial reconnaissance. "They're defending for a full major strike, not a small-group infiltration. Eliminate all hostile anti-air defenses so the rest of Noble can land at Sword Base for the torch and burn. Keep a low profile, we'll take them by surprise, this will be a hell lot easier."

Knowing time was of the essence and more than ready to fight, Mike checked his HUD and plotted a course for them to the objective. Setting out he pushed hard through the uneven terrain not moving with his usual stealth. The ODST's behind were hard pressed to keep up with him. They quickly made it to the remnants of the now-flooded Farragut Station. Thoughts of his last fight there and how much had changed since then pressed in but Mike quickly eliminated them as a thin screen of Covenant had set up an outpost. Several Shades and a deployable lookout tower supported the group of infantry holding this point of entry.

Good, Mike thought, time for talking was over.

The Spartan charged in gun blazing. He had taken an extra ammo loadout so aggressively sprayed the area, eager to inflict as much damage on the invaders. He moved deliberately and in the open allowing the Covenant to score numerous hits but his MJOLNIR armor absorbed them all allowing him to move more quickly, eliminating the blocking force. Then, as quickly as it began, things became silent.

"Structure's cleared, lieutenant," the sergeant leading the ODST team confirmed just as Mike caught the radio chatter of the other members of Noble Team.

"Kat was right. It does seem like overkill. Sending us back here for a simple demo op?" Emile mused.

"ONI thinks it's worth it," Jun responded evenly. "That tell you something?" he asked leadingly.

Emile snorted. "It tells me things ain't so simple."

Mike couldn't agree more.

Moving out of the small valley the advance party could see a line of deployable lookout towers blocking their only line of approach but then one of the troopers saw a M808 Scorpion Main Battle Tank to their right, sheltered by a large rocky outcropping. The operator sprinted up to the heavy tank and did a cursory check of it.

"Looks like we have a Scorpion still operational, sir," the ODST private reported.

"What do you think?' the team's sergeant asked.

"I think it's always better to ride than walk," Mike responded wryly.

"All right boys, you heard the man, mount up!" the senior NCO barked a twinkle of agreement in his eye.

Mike slide into the operator's position. Though it had been a while since he'd operated the main battle tank it came back to him quickly. Firing up the engine he swiveled the main turret getting a feel for the targeting system while the ODSTs loaded up.

The barren, narrow valley had been well-sighted by the Covenant with towers and Ghosts covering the approach but with the Main Battle Tank the human attackers were able to punch through. Sighting on a mobile

watch tower Mike thumbed the firing button and the M512 smooth bore high velocity cannon barked instantly in response sending a deadly shell into the structure. The Spartan smiled grimly. With one of the ODS'T's operating the medium machine gun the remainder of the team was protected by the tread pods. Despite heavy plasma and Needler fire lighting up the approach other than putting on a nice light show the tank allowed them to clear the area and move towards where the Covenant anti-aircraft batteries were lodged keeping the UNSC Pelican assault force at bay.

Punching the tank's accelerator the 66 metric ton vehicle roared in response throwing dirt in its wake as it charged up the hill. Even before they made the crest Mike could see the first of two massive Tyrant anti-aircraft batteries rising over 45 meters into the air. The small outpost of Airview Base had now been converted by the Covenant into an air defense station, commanding the approach to Sword Base.

While an aerial battle between Banshees and Falcons raged above Mike was urged on by Commander Carter.

"Get a move on, Noble Six. Our Falcons are standing by," the team leader urged. "Time to get to work. Take out those guns."

Taking advantage of the general chaos Mike charged right in, firing round after round of 90mm Tungsten shells into the first gun emplacement until the plasma bolt throwing weapon overloaded and blew.

That got the Covenant's attention.

Banshees came screaming in from the air, trying to destroy the Scorpion before it could take out the other gun. Mike was forced to dodge as best he could so the cumbersome vehicle could avoid too many direct hits. He countered with rounds from the main gun while the ODS'T on the medium machine gun added covering fire. Still, he watched the ceramic-titanium armor begin to deplete. In addition, Covenant infantry began to swarm all around them though the ODS'Ts outside were able to keep them successfully at bay.

"Sir, we need to get that gun off-line," the ODS'T sergeant called out urgently as the Tyrant let rip another three-round burst of ultra-heavy plasma bolts taking down a banking Falcon, "it's raining hell on our boys."

Mike grunted in agreement and frustration and opened fire from a distance hoping to get a lucky shot then having to rotate the turret hard to blast a Banshee swooping in at point-blank distance. Again he shot at the gun and again nothing happened. In frustration the Spartan jammed on the breaks and popped open the hatch. As he began to hop out Mike grabbed the ODS'T in the machine gunner's seat and hauled him into the operator's position.

"What theâ€¦?" the surprised shock trooper called out.

"Just cover me," Mike yelled above the fray of battle though his communicator made it unnecessary. "I'm going after the gun."

The Lone Wolf didn't wait to catch what the sergeant said and instead used his power-assisted suit to jump a third of the way from the side

of the tank. Hitting the ground at a sprint he charged past startled Grunts who hadn't expected anyone to leave the Scorpion considering the amount of fire. Using the element of surprise Mike didn't stop, running right into the anti-aircraft gun's lower control center. Moving closer he fired a long burst of armor piercing slugs from his Assault Rifle into the main power units housing cover, shattering it by the time he arrived. Then in one smooth motion he grabbed an HE grenade and deftly tossed it in. The ensuing explosion caused a system overload, effectively destroying the gun.

"Nice job, Six," Carter confirmed over the comms as he read the results on their sensor. "Falcons commence descent. Meet you inside the base, lieutenant."

With the Covenant withdrawing from the now-useless Airview Base the assault force had the opportunity for a breather before pushing on to Sword Base.

"Nice kill, Spartan!" the ODST sergeant declared, clapping him on the back. "Make sure they pay for Reach."

As Falcons were able to fly freely overhead, Mike slapped a fresh mag into his Assault Rifle and prepared to move. He continued to press on, oblivious of the location of his ODST team.

"Guys got a death wish," one of the exasperated shock troopers griped.

Mike heard it but didn't care. Maybe he did have a death wish. It didn't matter to him anymore.

He pushed the Scorpion as hard as he could, steaming along. With Sword Base having been built into the side of a mountain the path towards it narrowed with a dangerous drop to their left and sheer rock face on the right. Banshees swooped in to engage the tank while ground fire intensified. Mike never let up, keeping the accelerator at full throttle. He could see Noble's Falcon attempting to land but being forced to juke all over the sky in a symphony of ground and air fire. Firing and moving he finally brought the Scorpion into the shadows of the base but he'd lost the rest of his group. Then he heard some welcome news.

"Noble Team: Falcon group has landed, hostiles engaged. Jun is working on getting the gate open," Commander Carter reported.

Finally fighting his way to the massive gate Mike hopped out of the Scorpion, waiting for it to open. Thankfully the wait wasn't too long. With the sound of grinding metal the personnel gate began to rise.

"Got it. Gate's opened, boss," Jun confirmed.

"Six, get over here! Covvies all over the base," Carter called out urgently.

Mike stopped in the entry way, bathed in red emergency lighting and turned to his ODST team that still faithfully followed. "I'm on my own from here. Link up with the rest of the assault force." He turned to move out then stopped. "Thanks for the help guys. I couldn't have

made it here without you."

The scarred sergeant nodded his head in approval. "No problem. Thanks for saving some for us. Good luck."

The pair shook hands and they separated.

Mike took a deep breath, checked his ammo count and charged through the gateway and out to the open courtyard that connected to the main part of the base. Already Covenant were crowding around the position the remainder of Noble Team held. They were stuck and needed his added firepower to fight their way into the structure swarming with the alien invaders. With Six's momentum and an apparent lack of coordinated communications from the Covenant he was able to punch through a screen of Grunts and face a party of armored Elites who'd aggressively sortied out. Though a group of Jackals had also come out to take pot shots off the side the reconstituted Noble Team was able to take the initiative. Using a series of grenades and concentrated small arms fire they not only pressed through the cordon but eliminated it.

"Just in time, Six," Emile deadpanned as they took a momentary pause to reload their weapons.

Moving from the courtyard they punched into the lower entrance of the base in an arrowhead formation with Mike at the point. Here only a squad of Grunts skulked in the emergency lighting in what had once been a parking area for the base. Overwhelmed, the Unggoy paused in panic and were gunned down before they could respond. The Spartans didn't stop, knowing time was not on their side so pushed on through to a door at the opposite end. Not surprising, considering the state of base, the elevator was not working.

"We'll have to go through maintenance. Elevator's out," Carter ordered.

"Way this place's been done over, we're lucky anything still works," Emile snorted, sweeping the foyer with his shotgun.

Moving into the maintenance hall Mike again took the lead. The lighting was normal, showing there was still power in parts of the base but it was eerily quiet as they moved stealthily up a series of metal catwalks to their objective.

The respite lasted only a few minutes.

A series of Needler rounds barked out of the shadows from a hidden Jackal as two others engaged their energy shields. Rather than wait Mike dashed forward, shoulder bashing his way between them and knocking the pair askew like a pair of bowling pins. Their flanks exposed the remainder of Noble Team sawed them in half with automatic weapon fire. Mike kept pressing up where two more Jackals were sniping at the team from above. Walking fire from his Assault Rifle he drilled the one and forced the other to withdraw behind its own shield. The Kig-Yar began to fall back and Mike followed, right into a salvo of grenades dropped from above.

"Watch out!" Emile yelled in warning but it was too late.

The plasma charges went off and drained Mike's shield immediately.

His alarm claxon went off. Trying to fall back to cover two bolts from Plasma Rifles grazed him. Exposed they seared his armor and the Spartan could feel the heat bubbling his skin despite the protective layer he wore. Still, the blood lust was up and pausing only to regroup and his shield to only partially regenerate he charged forward with a savage yell. The Jackals didn't expect it, neither did the rest of Noble Team who were engaged in a running fight a floor below and pinned down.

"Six, fall back to our position and hold," Commander Carter ordered but the enraged Spartan didn't hear and kept pressing forward, eager to assuage the pain in his heart with Covenant blood.

The tactic worked despite every logical reason why it shouldn't. Mike split the Jackal reinforcements, scattering the rest while the more disciplined members of Noble Team mopped up the rest. Mike waited at the top of the catwalk system outside the security control area. He found a weapon rack and grabbed not only fresh magazines to replenish his depleted ammo but also a shotgun for the close quarters fighting they were doing.

The rest of Noble Team caught up.

"Thanks for saving some for us," Emile commented sarcastically.

Commander Carter opened his mouth to rebuke Mike but something about the lone Spartans body language caused him to pause and let it go. He hoped that whatever madness was engulfing the Lone Wolf had been burned out in that reckless charge.

Reforming and moving in carefully the signs of heavy fighting were everywhere. View screens were shattered; an alarm still rang while the red alert light still rotated. Bodies littered the floor surrounded by small arms-pockmarked walls.

"Where we going now, boss?" Jun asked after surveying the room.

Commander Carter was beginning to have a bad feeling about this mission. Something didn't seem to be adding up. Still, they had their orders. "Dot?" he asked their AI.

"Please proceed to the prearranged coordinates," Auntie Dot responded in her clipped English accent.

"Cryptic...", Emile commented, tracking around the room edgily.

"You know as much as I do, Noble Four," The AI responded churlishly. "Coordinates nearby, Commander."

"Alright we're close, up the ramp, to the right!" Carter directed, checking the waypoint on his HUD against the layout which was still familiar from their last visit.

The team fanned out around the heavy blast door leading into the atrium area of the base. The center piece raised then the left and right doors fanned outwards. The team charged in and stopped. The destruction in the former show piece of the base took their breath away. Everywhere there was debris, broken glass and destroyed

fixtures. The pause lasted only a moment. A squad of Elites came bellowing down a ramp into the Atrium to engage the Spartans. Mike opened fire with his Assault Rifle but all the rounds bounded harmlessly off the Sangheili who emitted a faint, tell-tale glow.

"Engineer!" Emile yelled as he found the same results.

In one smooth motion Mike switched to his shotgun and moved in close, pumping round after round into the nearing frothing warrior while avoiding its attack. Moving quickly he was able to finally take down the shield and drop the Elite but at the cost of three-quarters of his ammo. Unfortunately while that was going on another Elite took the opportunity to come in and wrestle Mike to the ground despite the fact it had a clear shot to take him out. The angry Sangheili had allowed his pride to get in the way. Mike flipped himself back up and smashed the Elite in the middle of its mandibles with his armored glove, stunning it. Falling back that allowed Commander Carter a clear shot who emptied a magazine into the angry creature then stuck it with a Plasma Grenade.

In the meantime, Jun had pulled back a bit, spotted the hovering Engineer hiding in the shadows near the shattered main window of the atrium and dropped the pesky Huragok with two precise rounds from his sniper rifle. Their enhanced shields gone, the Elites were unwilling to modify their aggressive tactics and fell quickly to the unrelenting attack of Noble Team.

Pressing on a short distance, following the co-ordinates given them by their AI the members were becoming anxious to blow the place and withdraw.

Coming to a door with the Office of Naval Intelligence symbol on it Carter confirmed what they'd been looking for. "This is it, in here."

Moving carefully through the door that opened without a sound, Noble Team entered into a corridor littered with dead bodies and destroyed equipment. A sandbagged unmanned turret gave testimony to the fact this was an area of significance.

"Looks like they got themselves cornered," Jun commented, surveying the scene with the keen eye of a sniper.

"_Or_ were committed to the position," Carter countered, checking their co-ordinates and knowing they were on their mark.

Emile moved around a corner and found it was a dead end. "I'm going with cornered," he added his voice. "There's nothing here."

"No load-bearing columns either," Jun added, sizing the location up for a demolition charge. "Sir, if we're supposed to blow this place, this ain't the spot to do it from."

Commander Carter tapped in frustration on the TACPAD on his wrist trying to confirm the co-ordinates while calling out at the same time, "Dot, check your vector."

"Vector confirmed, commander," the AI stated emphatically. "We are precisely where ONI has directed-" but then Auntie Dot paused in

mid-sentence. "Apologies. Coordinates revised. Please confirm?"

"Revised...?" Carter exclaimed in surprise.

"By an AI of unknown origin," she explained, "whose clearance is well above my own."

"Well, it's pointing us a klick-and-a-half east and two thousand feet underground_," Jun cut into the conversation picking up the co-ordinates.

"I didn't bring my shovel, commander," Emile complained.

"Sir, I say we go AI free on this one," Jun piped up. "Obviously, these coordinates are junk, and the longer we go chasing them-."

The sniper's declaration was cut off mid-sentence by a sudden grinding noise. Instantly all of Noble's weapons were up and safeties off. But rather than some form of attack a wall in the dead end opened up, revealing a secret passage.

With Emile standing in front of it, securing the way ahead and the rest of the team fanned out in a defensive position an exasperated Carter asked, "What is this, Dot?"

"Our revised route, commander," the AI responded as if nothing untoward had just happened.

Carter swore under his breath, paused for a moment then made up his mind. "Alright, we came this far."

Signaling Jun to take point, Noble One had the rest of the team follow into the hidden corridor which turned out to be a large service corridor. Carefully Noble Team moved deeper into the deathly quiet passageway. Low lighting and a dry fog emanating from the floor gave the place a creepy feel but the Spartans probed on until they found a tram at a loading bay with its door open.

Carter looked at it and Emile declared incredulously, "You've got to be kidding."

"Sir, this looks like a metal coffin to me," Jun added. "We're too exposed," he added, spinning around looking for an ambush.

"Mike, what do you think?" Carter asked, using his name for the first time rather than call sign, having the distinct sensation they were being watched despite nothing coming up on their IFF.

"Doesn't look like we have many options," Noble Six observed. "Besides, it seems like someone, or something, is setting this all up."

"All right, proceed." Carter signaled them into the tram. Once in he asked, "Your new AI friend tell you anything else, Dot?...Dot?"

The AI uncharacteristically hesitated before declaring mysteriously, "She's been expecting you."

"That's perfect," Emile grunted.

The tram got underway and almost at the same time a view screen appeared on the window in the direction they were heading. On screen appeared Dr. Catherine Halsey.

"Apologies for the unusual security measures, Commander," the controversial scientist began. "But the stakes demand it."

"Dr. Halsey," Carter responded in surprise. "Casualty reports have you listed as-"

The parka-wearing doctor cut him off. "Yes. Well, as they say, news of my death has been greatly exaggerated. I only wish the same could be said of the rest of Noble Team."

"We all do, ma'am," Carter responded reflectively, surprised by the hard woman's sudden burst of compassion.

"It may please you to learn the data module Noble Two procured from Visegrad station contained precisely what my scientist promised: a latchkey discovery," she tried to encourage them. "It has unlocked, at last, the secrets of this excavation."

"Not sure I understand," Carter answered hesitantly suddenly feeling like they were being led somewhere more than down a tunnel.

"Your orders were a pretext to bring you to me and have been overridden," Halsey revealed a bit haughtily. "You are here, Team Noble, to assure the delivery of this vital data to a secure location."

"Doctor, our orders are to destroy all sensitive material-"

She cut him off with the wave of a hand. "Others will handle the demolition."

Commander Carter tried to backpedal, to buy some time after this unexpected development. "I'll need to confirm this new directive with command-."

The brilliant but headstrong scientist was having no part of that. "Colonel Holland will be briefed," she declared. "You belong to ONI now."

36. Chapter 36

****Chapter 36****

****August 29, 2552 18:33 Hours,**** 2552, ****Sword Base, Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Eposz, Planet Reach****

"Oh man, that's just great," Emile groaned under his breath just as their tram entered into a massive cave complex and began to slowly drop like an elevator. Roughly disc-shaped it was hard to determine the caverns exact size but it did span several hundred feet into the darkness of the glacier it had been carved out of. Prominent though at the opposite end of the cavern was a massive structure.

"What the hell?" the volatile Spartan exclaimed involuntarily at the

complex that housed an array of gigantic machinery that none of the Spartans could identify.

"Before you is an alien artifact neither human or Covenant in origin," Dr. Halsey declared, hearing the comment over the intercom, "advanced beyond our comprehension...until now. Thanks to Noble Two, the decryption of its data is nearly complete."

A loud crumbling sound filled the chamber causing a pause in the conversation. Involuntarily the Spartans shifted their gaze out the window to see a few large boulders falling from the cave's ceiling, almost as if something was digging from above.

"Whatever we're doing down here, we better do it quick," Emile commented tersely.

"Have your data ready, ma'am," Commander Carter declared. "We're coming to you."

"The decrypting data is still underway...", Dr. Halsey reported a bit imperiously.

"I don't think you understand. We're out of time," Noble One responded with an edge to his voice. "If it isn't portable when we reach you, it's gonna get buried."

"Bury any of it, and you bury mankind's best chance of survival!" the temperamental doctor shot back testily but then her tone changed. "Commander, you've been wondering what your Spartans died for? They died for this. Please. Buy me all the time you can."

The declaration silenced Commander Carter. The Spartans looked at each other and without a word determined to guard this to the last man. The tram pulled into a docking station leading to the chamber grinding to a halt. Noiselessly the metal mesh door opened to a steel deck area and the team stepped out.

**August 29, 2552 18:35 Hours, 2552, Sydney, Australia, Planet Earth
**

Natalia stared at the piece of abstract art that adorned the wall of her expensively decorated condo in Sydney. She'd paid five figures for it and never given it a second thought. Suddenly everything around her had new meaning, new significance. She has another similar home in New York City, reflecting her wealth and tastes; someone who live the high life.

The moody woman had been reflecting on the last few days. _Have I only been back on Earth two days?_ She thought to herself. It seemed like a lifetime_. I wonder what's going on with Mike. _

The woman had needed two places to live because her work took her between the major cities... _My work? What a joke!_ She chided herself. She knew it had been fabricated by her father. _I've been fit in, a token, of no real worth beyond a trophy,_ she continued to punish herself. But on Reach it had been different; on Reach she'd been her own person, stood on her own two feet.

Natalia knew she'd never get that chance again. Her father had declared it after their meeting and she'd not spoken to him since.

She held no hope since in her meeting with Admiral Parangosky the cunning officer had alluded to it as well.

The woman had gone to Bravo-6 for the ordered meeting. "The Hive" as it was nicknamed was its usual hive of activity. She'd been to it hundreds of times and yet this time it had taken on a more sinister tone. HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-6, headquarters of the United Nations Space Command was roughly conical in structure while on the outside it was surrounded by security gates and numerous other defense elements. The agreeably appointed entrance way bore a multi-story atrium that allowed in ample natural light. Natalia had always found it a pleasant place and the thrum of activity stimulating. But taking the main elevator the three kilometers down into the bowels of the structure it had a more foreboding feel to it. The ONI officer passed several heavily armed non-commissioned soldiers none of who saluted her. Rather they stared at her with almost open hostility, as if daring her to step outside the lines marking the way to the inner chambers.

Admiral Parangosky had been unusually pleasant, an unnerving experience, having even offered her coffee. As always, her aide Captain Serin Osman stood a pace-and-a-half behind. Their conversation was briefer than expected and hadn't really gotten into any of the details of what she'd seen or experienced. When Natalia had tried to interject information and especially when she tried to advocate on behalf of Noble Team, the elderly woman had surreptitiously cut her off. Then, with a wave she was dismissed. The officer had been given no real assignment going forward so seemed to be in a state of limbo.

Then there was her father.

Spanner Misriah was up to something. Though once she'd finished screaming at him for his interference she'd stopped talking to father, that didn't stop her from observing. She'd also honed her already effective skills of observation on Reach. He spent a good portion of his time talking lowly on his communication device as well as sending and receiving messages. And while MacKenzie had wanted to be attentive to her several sharp looks from her father had sent him scurrying away on some form of mission.

"Some homecoming," she grunted to herself.

No, he was up to something. She just wasn't sure what. Despite trying hard not to care, the woman's curiosity was piqued and so she determined to watch things more closely.

Despair enveloped the woman like a wet blanket, or perhaps like a bank of fog, or, as she thought further, a wet blanket in a bank of fog. She knew she'd never be the same and didn't know what that meant. She stood up, paced like a caged animal and then agitatedly flopped down again.

Then she saw the utility pouch that had been on her armor sitting in the corner where she'd thrown it when she got in. With a sigh the moody woman realized she needed to deal with this at some point so picked it up to begin unpacking.

For the first day back on Earth she'd fantasized about going back, planning in her mind how to make it happen, but she knew that would

never happen so the constant reminder was like an untreated burr. Unbuckling the fastening system she opened the flap and woodenly slipped her hand inside then stopped suddenly. She felt something small and metal on the top of the pile. She pulled it out and found two metallic discs hanging from a thin linked chain.

"What theâ€¦," she said to herself and then froze as she read what was on it.

Nantz, Michael M, B312

They were Mike's dog tags.

A wave of emotion hit her like a sledgehammer and she involuntarily fell to her knees, stomach churning and eyes filling with tears. She couldn't breathe and her vision clouded.

He must have slipped them into her utility pouch when he forced her onto the Pelican, she reasoned. That was the only explanation.

Running them between her thumb and forefinger memories came flooding back in as elation replaced misery. Thoughts of his lips pressed against hers were intoxicating and she found herself giggling giddily despite the tears as his scarred face came clearly into her mind, the slight smile, the way he tilted his head when he was thinkingâ€¦how he told her he loved her. _Why? Why did he do this?_ She thought to herself.

Then it hit her like a round from a MAC gun.

He knew he was never going to get off Reach.

If the emotional current that hit her before was bad this one was crippling. Her heart sank into a dark place. She should be there with him, to die with him. How could she go on? Where was the closure? She didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.

Howls of anguish burst forth like a dam bursting at the seams. Natalia began to scream at the top of her lungs, rage, grief, hopelessness came spilling out as Natalia finally lost control.

The broken woman didn't hear her door buzzer go off. It rang repeatedly then stopped as she was lost in misery.

The door to her condo was unlocked and someone came walking.

"Tali? Tali are you there?"

It was MacKenzie.

Of course it is. He has a key, Natalia reflected, suddenly pulled out of her grief by the unexpected arrival. It seemed like a lifetime and a different person ago when she'd given it to him. It had been such a game. Stinger. The word condemned her, like a judge sending a condemned man to execution. She began to howl more loudly.

MacKenzie heard the cries and came running to the woman sitting in a heap on the floor clutching her knees. Dropping down beside her he called out, "Tali, are you hurt? What's going on? Speak to me,

please."

Through tear-stained eyes Natalia saw her handsome suitor, tenderly caressing her hair, a bouquet of flowers still clutched in his hands. A wave of nausea came over her but she was alone in a dark place. Utterly defeated she accepted the embrace and got lost in it.

****August 29, 2552 18:37 Hours, 2552**, **Sword Base, Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Eposz, Planet Reach****

The Spartans moved onto the deck area, sweeping it with their weapons, assessing the terrain automatically as they began to prepare for a defensive fight.

"Let's find Halsey's lab," Carter ordered the team. "Move out!"

Moving down a series of metal ramps the team swept through the light fog caused by the ice of the glacier in the massive structure. Mike began assessing the area, looking at their options. He was encouraged to see several M8 Wolf Spider automated defense turrets. Obviously this was an area the UNSC had been preparing to defend. Despite his previous time on Reach the enigmatic planet still had secrets to reveal.

Jun spotted the turrets at the same time Mike did. "Commander, I'm seeing turrets already in defensive positions."

"ONI was expecting company?" Emile noted sardonically.

Then the familiar whistle of Covenant dropships could be heard as several more boulders fell to the ground. The sight of the invader's vessels dropping from the cave's ceiling gave a greater sense of urgency to an already frantic moment.

"They sure as hell got it," Carter responded to Emile's comment. "Doctor, we have hostiles inbound."

"Spartans, you cannot allow the Covenant to break through the door to my lab," Dr. Halsey answered frantically.

"Understood," Carter answered then turned to his team. "Let's give the doctor the time she needs."

A controller within the complex joined in the preparations for battle. "Noble Team, there are four defense turrets to assist you in defending the lab. Get them online, and quick! When the turrets take too much damage, they'll shut down to recharge. You'll need to reactivate them when they come back online."

"What do you think, Six?" Carter asked as they arrived at the heavy blast door shielding Dr. Halsey's lab on the lower levels of the complex.

Mike looked around finalizing the assessment he'd already made on the way down to their defensive position. "Here's the choke point so this is our key spot," he declared. "That also is our disadvantage. We're stuck here and they're coming right for it."

"How do you want to play it?" Carter asked, watching several Phantoms slowly circling down towards the far end of the cave complex.

"Depends on what they send, whether its Brutes or Elites," Mike answered.

"Yea, those boys don't play well together, do they," Emile observed.

Mike continued, "Doesn't matter really. Brutes'll charge in, Elites will be more tactical. Regardless, we hit them in the open and keep them in the kill zone of the turrets and we don't let them get to the ramp. If they do, this is our strong point," he pointed to a group of shipping containers and sandbags standing in close proximity to the door to the lab. "We keep the turrets online and pray Halsey's a fast typer."

"Works for me," Carter confirmed. "What do the rest of you think?"

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

"Okay Noble, let's get the job done," their commander declared looking around at the abundant supply of weapon's crates and armor abilities pre-loaded in the area. _Well, at least they're giving us something to work with,_ he thought as he watched more Phantoms enter the chamber. Okay, Noble Six, activate the turrets," he ordered. "The rest of you, set up a perimeter."

Mike sprinted off to get their critical defensive assets on-line. Even with his armor-enhanced speed he could feel the clock ticking away. The first two were close and he reached them in short order. Hitting the button the turret came alive and its main gun popped out of the hatch on its mechanical arm and spooled into position. Mike saw the name _Misriah Armory_ on the side in passing. The sight took his breath away for a moment and he froze involuntarily. Quickly he shook it off and carried on, pressing thoughts of Natalia out of his mind. The other two were farther away and the Lone Wolf watched several more Phantoms and now more dangerously a group of larger Spirit dropships flare and drop below a series of boulders.

"They're landing out of range, across the bridge!" Emile reported from his defensive position on the ramp leading to the door into the lab.

"I need more time. Whatever you do, do it," Dr. Halsey cut in urgently.

Mike got the two other turrets engaged and returned to the Spartan line just as the first wave of Grunts hit.

Grabbing an M319 Grenade Launcher as the other members of Noble shredded the Unggoy coming straight up the gut, Mike prepared for the real battle to start. The Covenant were using the squat, waddling creatures to mark their targets and determine what they were up against.

Cold bastards, Mike thought to himself as more of the shrieking creatures were cut down. But then he spotted a group of Jackals

advancing stealthily behind their shields and popped off two quick 40mm rounds to blow them up.

The air was ripped by the roar of Brutes charging for the ramp, answering the question about who was coming for the lab.

The M8 Wolf Spider turrets had opened up by now and their interlocking fields of fire ripped apart the attacking force with concentrated fire from their 12.7x99mm automated machine guns.

Pumping a grenade into the chamber Mike expertly popped another one into the mass, breaking up their charge. The Spartans would fire and move, not staying in one place and allow for any concentrated return fires. Despite the lower numbers theirs was a dance of destruction that the Spartans had become adept at over the past few weeks, instinctively knowing where each other would be.

Thus far Commander Carter was pleased with how the fight was going as they'd beaten off the initial assault allowing for a lull in the action. Despite being outnumbered Noble Team had good ground and was keeping the attackers at bay. The reflective officer was still smarting from the loss of Kat and Jorge and desperately didn't want to lose anyone else. He knew the importance of the mission but also knew the importance of the remaining team members to him. That never really seemed to matter to higher command though.

His respite was short lived.

A large red dot appeared on Carter's HUD just as Emile called out the new threat.

"We got targets!" the volatile Spartan called out urgently. "Watch out for those Wraiths!"

Almost immediately Plasma Mortar rounds began to drop close to the Spartan's position as the dangerous tanks stayed well back from the fight. A fresh wave of Grunts and Jackals supported by a larger group of Brutes charged in, pressing the position hard. A splash of Plasma dropped near Jun's position but fortunately the alert sniper saw it coming and jumped out of the way a moment before it splashed burning up his position.

The Spartans were being pushed back by the concentrated fire and were forced to move into their last-stand position and away from the fire of the Wolf Spider turrets.

Mike saw the threat and sprinted over to one of the weapons lockers. Grabbing a Jackhammer rocket launcher he then leapt over the guard rail to drop ten feet down to a pair of Mongooses. Firing up one of the ATV's he raced through the surprised Covenant line heading towards another metal platform well away from their current battle ground. Hopping off the four-wheeled vehicle before it stopped he ran up the ramp to a high position and in one smooth motion brought the Jackhammer to bear on the Wraith only fifty meters to his front loosing a 102mm high explosive rocket. Ducking behind cover Mike reloaded and prepared to fire again. Looking around he could see the mortar tank had no infantry cover so stepped out and hit it again with another round. The third one did the charm and the threat was eliminated in a molten explosion.

By this point Jackals were starting to snipe at him so he ran back to the Mongoose and hitting the accelerator shot back to their defensive position.

Unfortunately, about a hundred meters away a round from a Brute Shot hit him and drove him off the bike. Mike tumbled over and over as the bike went in the opposite direction. A group of Brutes swarmed around him looking to finish off what they'd begun. Mike deftly rolled away and opened fire with his Assault Rifle, driving one back but the other two had him. Then he heard a crack crack and the second went down with a roar, having been shot by Jun's sniper rifle. That was followed by the bam bam crash of Emile gunning down the third Brute with his shotgun at close range. The volatile Spartan came over and held out his hand to help Mike up. The two then skirmished back to the strong point and continued the fight.

Then, just as it began, things became quiet again. The Covenant seemed to be regrouping and Noble took the opportunity to rearm. So far they'd held the Brute attack off with little trouble and they began to grow in confidence that they'd actually come out of this alive.

Dr. Halsey reported in over the comms, "Hold on, Spartans. I'm getting close."

Then a fresh wave of Phantoms came swooping in to disgorge the troops within.

"Another Phantom! Dropping troops to flank us!" Emile reported.

"Need to shift the line," Carter called out urgently, "Can't let them get behind us."

And just as quickly the cool air inside the glacial cave lit up as purple streaks of plasma filled the air. A whole section of Elites came charging in, screaming their battle cries. Their blood lust up the Sangheili far outstripped the waddling Grunts and opportunistic Jackals who were to form their vanguard. The assault was brutal and swift. The Spartans barely had time to react and soon found themselves fighting the swarming enemy right on the edge of the ramp and gangway fronting the lab entrance. Mike dropped his grenade launcher, the reload time being too slow and switched to his Assault Rifle. Using controlled bursts he then dashed in and savagely beat down several Elites when their shields dropped. The others in Noble Team were equally hard pressed but they continued to hold the line.

"Package is almost ready," Dr. Halsey encouraged them. "Just a little more."

But if that was not enough, several more Phantoms swooped near overhead as three of the Spider Wolf turrets went off line. Causing a chill, the new Covenant assault was led by a golden-armored Elite General who not only headed up a phalanx of Sangheili but then two Hunters lumbered out as well.

"We can't hold them!" Emile yelled, stabbing a Jackal through its energy shield with his Kukri while dropping his empty shotgun.

Picking up a freshly loaded one from the rack he pummeled another with the butt end.

"Got to get those turrets back online or we're done," Carter called out, backed into a defensive position behind some crates.

Mike could see what they were facing and suddenly he was calmer than he'd been in days. Natalia's leaving, Kat and Jorge's death, they were all gone now in the urgency to help his teammates. He knew what had to be done. Leaving the safety of cover he dashed headlong down the ramp bulling past a started Elite running towards the first turret needing to be reset.

"What the hell are you doing Six?" Emile screamed through the comms.

"Getting the turrets back up," he grunted as he took a full splash of plasma, depleting his shields.

"Forget it, that's crazy," Carter joined in. "Get back here, now."

Still running, dodging and weaving he kept moving responded, "Sorry boss, I'm a Lone Wolf."

Miraculously Mike made it to the first gun and hit the reset button. Not waiting he turned and moved to the next. Fortunately he saw out of the corner of his visor one of the Hunters let lose a round from its fuel rod Assault Cannon. He dodged at the right time but the massive salvo still clipped him throwing him pell mell head over heels into the ice floor. Fate was favoring the beleaguered defenders because the force of the blast actually took him clear through an Elite screen, killing two of the warriors and throwing him right at the base of the second turret.

Pushing the button as he got up, Mike rolled out of the way and fired a full magazine into a screaming Elite. He knew it wouldn't work since the Sangheili had an enhanced overshield. Looking around Mike could see the Huragok Engineer but at least the salvo set the Elite back on his heels and allowed the Spartan to jump up and sprint to the third. Even though he knew he would reset the third gun he also knew he'd never make it back to the strong hold. The force converging on him was too much. Mike didn't care. He was ready to die, wanted to die in some ways. If he could give his life to save his friends he'd say it was well spent.

But it wasn't going to happen at that moment.

Before he hit the reset button the first turret than the second came alive and opened fire with a massive salvo of armor-piercing rounds. Despite the overshields it wasn't enough to protect the massing Elites from the deadly cross fire. Mike ducked underneath it and moving out of the storm of bullets ran back to the compressing defensive position.

Ghost Rapid Attack Vehicles came swooping in to add firepower and the air became thicker with ordinance if that was possible. Several zeroed in on the Spartan, trying to cut him off from help. But the Lone Wolf turned the tables and deftly jumped up as one approached and flipped in behind the Elite who was piloting it. The Sangheili

reacted in surprise as Mike grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and threw the creature surreptitiously out of the moving vehicle. Taking control the Spartan did a quick turn and brought the craft's two medium plasma cannons to bear on the nearest other Ghost. Caught off guard the Elite piloting was unprepared for the attack and roared as his vehicle blew up. Mike turned and hit the afterburner to return to their defensive position.

He didn't make it.

One of the charging Hunters fired its Fuel Rod Gun blowing Mike and the Ghost into the air. The Mgalekgolo roared in approval and lowered its shoulder to plant the Spartan into the ground with its heavy shield. Mike moved out of the way just in time but was totally vulnerable. A loud whoosh filled the air and the Hunter exploded spraying wriggling entrails from a rocket fired by Emile.

"Come on Six, we'll cover you!" Noble Four yelled through the comms.

Mike needed no encouragement. He flipped out to his feet while the Hunter's mate wailed in anguish, taking advantage of the pause to return to still compressing defensive position.

"Well done, Spartans. I am opening the laboratory door," Dr. Halsey reported with relief.

"Six, get the blast door open!" Carter called out urgently as the enraged remaining Hunter began to snort and prepare to attack.

Mike was closest as he grabbed a new Assault Rifle to replace the one destroyed when he crashed the Ghost. He stepped over to a flashing button and hit it. With a loud screeching sound the heavy metals doors began to open. Noble Team fell back in good order, concentrating their fire to hold the swarming Covenant at bay. They successfully maintained their position until the thick door closed with a metallic rumble.

"That was close," Jun declared, taking his helmet off to wipe sweat from his shiny brow despite the climate control system in his MJOLNIR armor.

"Yea man," Emile agreed, reloading his shotgun. "Whatever's in here sure must be important."

"Come on, let's go," Carter ordered, gesturing them down a corridor to an open area beyond.

Moving into the lab area the Spartans stopped in their tracks as they watched a revolving array of lights, symbols and shapes moving around a large sphere-shaped artifact hovering in the air above the glass-enclosed facility.

"What is this stuff?" Jun asked with a sense of awe.

Dr. Halsey didn't look up from her work. The trim older woman seemed to still be in the middle of preparing whatever package had been important enough to divert Noble Team to Sword Base. Moving to another monitor she answered, "Knowledge. A birthright from an ancient civilization. This AI is its custodian, and she has chosen

you as her carriers."

"Chosen? By an AI?" Emile stated in surprise.

"By this AI, yes," Dr. Halsey confirmed. "Her measure of you carries as much weight as my own, perhaps more."

The brilliant scientist moved away from the monitor revealing a squat holo-tank with a gorgeous blue female AI within who ignored the conversation and continued to analyze data from the ancient artifact.

Dr. Halsey seemed amused by the stares of the supersoldiers at the AI who appeared to be wearing no clothes but said nothing, instead continuing with her instructions. "You are to take her to the UNSC ship-breaking yards in Aszod. There, you will find a Halcyon-class light cruiser waiting to get her off planet."

"I understand," Commander Carter confirmed, still uncomfortable with how all this was turning out.

"Do you?" Dr. Halsey challenged but without malice. "Mankind is outmatched. When Reach falls, and it will fall, our annihilation is all but certain. Unless...we can glean from this artifact a defense against the Covenant." She turned to look at the Spartans before continuing. "This is a game-changer. On the level of the conical bullet in the nineteenth century, or faster-than-light travel in the twenty-third."

"And what if we can't?" Carter asked.

"An apt question if there were somewhere else to place our hope. There is not," the scientist responded philosophically. She paused and looked affectionately at the AI before shutting off her projection. Then, with a look of determination, Dr. Halsey turned the handle of the storage unit it to unlock it from the workstation and pulled it out. She then walked over to Mike.

"Take it lieutenant, she has made her choice," Halsey declared holding it out.

"What?" Mike responded in surprise.

"You are to be the one to see her to her destination," the scientist confirmed.

"Why me?" the conflicted Spartan blurted out.

"Because Cortana has looked into you and sees there is more than meets the eye," Halsey professed, a twinkle in her eye.

Mike looked over at Commander Carter, confused and torn by the order and the declaration. The leader of Noble nodded in response so he put his hands onto the package.

"Do you have it?" Halsey asked.

"Yes," Mike answered.

"Say the words, please," she responded pointedly.

"I have it."

Dr. Halsey looked at Mike Nantz, the Lone Wolf, and knew her own special AI was in the right hands.

37. Chapter 37

****Chapter 37****

****August 30, 2552 1137 Hours,***Sword Base, Babd Catha Ice Shelf, Eposz, Planet Reach****

Mike realized he'd lost all sense of the time as the remainder of Noble Team travelled with Dr. Halsey away from her lab. He looked at the mission clock on his HUD and saw it was nearly noon the day after this whole thing had begun. "Time flies when you're having fun," he mused to himself.

"I'm sorry?" Dr. Halsey asked, not quite catching what he'd said. Or did she? In the time they'd been together the insightful Spartan had figured out the brilliant scientist was not only intelligent but also cagey.

"Nothing ma'am," he tried to brush it off. "Just talking to myself."

"Hmmm," she responded, looking at him while they walked, as if analyzing him. "You seem to have a lot on your mind."

"We all do, ma'am," the still-troubled Spartan tried to deflect. "I'm nothing special."

"But you are special, Noble Six. Or should I say Mike," Halsey's grey-blue eyes suddenly lighting up with a playful twinkle as she emphasized his name.

"No, I'm not. I'm expendable. A tool of war, Mike answered flatly, wanting no part of this conversation.

"Ah yes, Colonel Ackerson's dirty little secret."

"I guess. Doesn't matter," Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I'll make sure the package makes it through."

"This is more than about a package lieutenant, as important as that may be. And you are not expendable," Halsey declared with a passion in her voice that surprised Mike. Then the scientist softened, taking an almost maternal tone. "You have much to live for. Cortana has seen that in you. Please, don't give up," she urged him, spontaneously grabbing his armored arm and causing him to stop despite their size differential, her voice thick with compassion.

"What? What does she see in me?" Mike asked, barely above a whisper despite every fiber of his body screaming not to ask.

"She sees character Mike. More than what you project and more than you see. Michael Nantz, you are more than the Lone Wolf. That is a construct based on circumstances. Cortana chose you because you have

a noble lineage and legacy that is deeper than even you can see."

"She sees that?" Mike responded, voice choked by the implications of the declaration.

"Throw off the shackles of insecurity and be the man you're destined to be," Halsey urged.

"Come on, let's keep moving," Commander Carter called out from the point position, realizing they'd stopped. Emile was crouching down covering the rear. The volatile Spartan said nothing, watching his arc, allowing them to have their moment.

"Let's go," Mike confirmed, starting to walk briskly away, but he turned back and said to Dr. Halsey, "and thanks, that means a lot."

"You take care of yourself Noble Six," she added, "and thank you for taking care of Cortana."

Mike continued to walk rapidly right past Commander Carter to take the point. The leader of Noble Team looked at him, as if wondering what he and Halsey had been talking about but said nothing.

Mike could feel the presence of the AI despite it, or should he say her, being in the data storage unit which gave off a light blue glow now on his back. He had a lot of questions. How could this AI know so much about him? True, his service record was known and Halsey and this AI would likely have the highest level of clearance, but she also seemed to have insights into who he was even he didn't know. Or was it perhaps obvious to everyone who took the time to examine him besides himself? Cortana knew, Natalia knew. Why didn't he know?

The Spartan pushed the thoughts out of his mind as the end of the cavern they'd been travelling down showed its opening and he prepared for what lay beyond.

_What good is it to know all this when I'm never going to get off Reach? _Mike thought to himself fatalistically.

The group came out of the tunnel to a pink-hued morning sky. Though clear, heavy grey clouds were slowly beginning to roll in. The party came out onto an emergency landing pad built into the face of one of the rugged mountains overlooking Sword Base on the plain below. As expected, two Pelicans sat on the metal deck.

Dr. Halsey had started a self-destruct timer that would destroy the base and deny the Covenant who'd still been trying to force their way into the scientist's lab when they'd taken an escape tram to this point. So the clock was ticking.

Looking out the scene was ruggedly gorgeous, tranquil even if one didn't know the destructive forces that had been wrought the past few days. Still, the air was thankfully clear of Covenant aircraft allowing the humans this opportunity for escape.

Carter moved towards the craft on the right but Dr. Halsey started to move towards the second Pelican on the left and away from the team.

The leader of Noble Team turned back and declared, "Dr. Halsey, Noble Three will escort you to Castle Base."

"I require no escort, commander-," the independent-minded scientist declared.

Carter cut her off. "Jun, make sure nothing falls into enemy hands," he emphasized to the team's sniper.

"I'll do what's necessary, sir," Jun answered, grasping Carter's drift. If Dr. Halsey caught the implicit threat she didn't say anything. The sniper nodded his head in agreement then looked to the remaining members of Noble and their leader. "Good Luck."

"You too, rifleman," Carter answered with a bit of melancholy in his voice.

With nothing left to say, Jun and Dr. Halsey headed towards the second craft as Commander Carter continued on towards the one he'd been heading to with the other two Spartans in tow. While the head of Noble Team hopped into the pilot's seat in the cockpit then began the pre-takeoff sequence Mike and Emile held the perimeter. Despite how quiet it was none were willing to let their guards down.

Punching a series of buttons the engines whined and began to come to life. "I need a heading, Dot," Carter called out to the team's AI.

"At three kilometers north, turn right. Heading zero-five-zero," the accented female voice responded.

"Which leads to?" Carter asked.

"The ship-breaking yard in Azsod," Auntie Dot confirmed. "The only off-planet extraction point left on this continent. Small scale air attacks have decimated many convoys en route. An armada of Covenant cruisers have hastened to that location as well. UNSC cruiser, Pillar of Autumn is waiting for your arrival."

Carter exhaled heavily followed by a low chuckle as he shook his head in disbelief at yet again another impossible assignment. "Wouldn't be a Noble mission if it were easy," he answered grimly. "Okay boys, let's roll."

Mike trotted into the empty bay while Emile sat down on the open ramp as the Pelican took off. While the ship gained altitude the two Spartans watched as the explosive charges went off beneath the ice shelf of Sword Base destroying what remained of the UNSC complex and alien structure below it. The lake around the base began to drain into the gaping hole in the surface as water poured into the opening, flooding the excavation area.

"Good riddance," Emile grunted as the Pelican took flight towards their new objective. Their race against the clock had now gotten even shorter.

**August 30, 2552 1154 Hours, 2552, Sydney, Australia, Planet Earth
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"Sir, it's your daughter," Spanner Misriah's immaculately dressed female assistant pointed out to the multi-billionaire who was busy talking on his mobile device in the Misriah Armory offices in the city. The tall man looked up from his conversation and noted his equally tall daughter's approach with a slight smile of satisfaction though he continued what he was doing.

Natalia knew her father was aware of her approach as she moved closer though he gave no indication of this fact. The observant woman had seen the gesture of his assistant, whose name she didn't remember, and her father's reaction. She knew his body language well enough.

MacKenzie wasn't there, Natalia observed, and that was a good thing. Their conversation the previous day had gone well but left her confused and unsettled. Her would-be suitor had been very kind, not trying anything intimate with her due to his perception she'd been traumatized on Reach. Yet he'd given every indication of interest in that by the way he'd touched her several times.

For her part, Natalia didn't have the energy to deny him so had allowed the eager man to indulge himself. Several times she'd wanted to tell him about Mike, about what had happened on Reach, but she just couldn't bring herself to do that. Why? Was she forgetting about Mike already? No, it wasn't that. She'd never forget him. Then why not be forthright? Maybe it was the change in environment. Confusion began to grow, causing a state of gridlock in the tormented woman. Seeking a measure of comfort she now wore his ID discs on a chain around her neck. They were warm against her chest, just as she imaged he'd feel pressed against her.

Rather than her armor or even a uniform Natalia was in civilian clothes. A pair of black form-fitting pants, black high-heeled boots and tight white button-up shirt accentuated her figure catching the eye of several she'd passed. She could have gone in uniform but now it seemed awkward. Already she felt like she was losing herself, or at least losing what she'd discovered on Reach.

Spanner Misriah made his daughter wait as she stopped in front of him. He gave her a nod of acknowledgement but then turned his back to shield his conversation while the businessman's slender female assistant stood between the two. Though annoyed at the implication this woman thought she could stop Natalia the aggressive ONI officer let it pass.

"Good morning Natalia," her father looked over as he finished his conversation and handed his communication device to the hovering assistant who he waved off with a slight nod of the head.

"Good morning father," Natalia responded neutrally, marveling anew at the power this man had over people.

"Would you care for some lunch?" her father asked, suddenly seeming almost vulnerable in the way he asked, as if looking for some sort of connection.

"No thanks," the woman with a mission responded brusquely, wanting no part of anything Spanner Misriah had to offer. She was there for answers.

Unexpectedly guilt filled Natalia at the sudden look of disappointment that came over his hard face.

"Sure, okay," she agreed. "That would be fine."

A short time later, in a private room overlooking the harbor and sparkling blue water of the Tasman Sea Natalia picked over a grilled chicken salad while her father devoured a rare sirloin steak. They'd spoken little and an awkward silence hung over father and daughter.

Natalia chided herself for not being able to speak. She'd faced the Covenant but yet seemed more afraid of her own father. But she was a different woman so swallowing a bite of food despite having no appetite she asked the question that had brought her to the man who still controlled so much of her life. "Why did you do it?" she said evenly, not able to make eye contact.

"Do what?" her father responded obliquely.

Anger flaring at the evasive answer, her emerald green eyes laser-locked onto him. "You know what I'm talking about! Why did you pull me off of Reach?"

"That was Admiral Parangosky's doing," he responded weakly.

"Cut the crap, father. She would never have arranged it without your prompting. I'm not that valuable to her. So why?" she pressed in. "Why did you do it?"

"Because you're valuable to me," Spanner Misriah finally answered, his usually commanding voice very low and definitely vulnerable this time.

In her anger Natalia missed the emotion in her father's voice. "Valuable? I have no value to you," she shot back. "I can do nothing to help with your empire building."

"That's not what I meant," Spanner responded with a hurt expression.

"Then what? What do you mean?" Natalia asked less aggressively, having finally caught the change in her father.

"Iâ€¦I couldn't lose you," the hard man's voice broke slightly. "I didn't want you to die on the other side of the galaxy. You'reâ€¦you're all I have."

Natalia was stunned by the declaration and wasn't sure what to make of it. Her father seemed almost embarrassed and wouldn't look at her. She took her slender fingers and massaged her temples as a low-grade headache from the stress of all this began to pulse. "Okay, I get that and appreciate your concern," Natalia measured her words carefully. "But I was finally doing something on my own. I was actually contributing without having to wonder if you were pulling the strings and you took that away from me." She paused as she thought back to the incident on Reach when she'd been forced to leave. "But it turned out you really were pulling strings after all. I never really was free of it."

"I'm sorry," the words came out as barely a whisper.

"Pardon?" Natalia asked, stunned at the declaration and uncertain she'd heard what she thought she had.

"I said I'm sorry. I was thinking about myself and didn't consider you wouldn't want to leave," her father answered defensively. Then his analytical mind kicked in and he came out of his reflective funk. "What changed? You didn't want to go in the first place. The admiral had to force you. I never thought it would be an issue."

Now it was Natalia's turn to be on the defensive. She wanted to tell him about Mike, about what she'd done, everything, but how could she tell him she'd fallen in love with a Spartan? How could she tell him about combat? Suddenly her confidence washed away and all she could say was, "I was making a difference. What we were doing was making a difference."

"To what end though? Reach is lost. If it hasn't fallen already it's only got days left."

The declaration stunned Natalia who'd never considered the UNSC would allow this major center to be lost. "How can that be?" her voiced became husky. "What about our fleet? What about the reinforcements?"

"All lost," her father responded without emotion. "Wasted on a fool's errand."

"But what about those left on the planet?" Natalia choked out.

"From what I've learned they've evac'd all they can. Anyone left there is gone, fighting a rear-guard action to buy time for the others to get away."

A cold chill of dread came over Natalia. It was something deep down she knew but would never admit; the fear of an unspoken inevitability enveloped her. Then a biting phrase entered her mind: expendable soldiers.

That's what Noble Team was. That's what Mike was. Expendable. But how could that be? They had hopes and dreams. They could love as Mike loved her and now they were being used up like some depleted commodity and thrown away.

And she was home safe.

Bile leapt up into her throat and she gagged involuntarily.

"Are you okay, Natalia?" her father leaned over immediately to attend to her, concern framing his handsome face.

"I'm fine," she lied, "I just don't feel well."

"Okay, we can finish up and leave," her father said with surprising tenderness. "Listen, I have to go off planet for a couple of days but when I get back I want to talk to you about something."

"Where are you going?" Natalia asked, trying to distract herself from the pain of knowing eating a hole in her stomach.

"Oh, it's just business, but it can't wait. Nothing to concern yourself with though," Spanner responded evasively. "But more importantly, I want to speak to you about something MacKenzie and I have been talking about since you left for Reach."

Natalia could only imagine what the two of them had been scheming about. She looked at her expensive lunch, likely the equivalent of two day's pay for a Spartan and knew if she put another bite into her mouth she'd throw up. Privilege always seemed to win out she thought to herself as Mike's ID discs seemed to grow heavier around her neck.

****August 30, 2552 16:52 Hours Aszod, Eposz, Planet Reach****

The initial flight from Sword Base had gone well. For over four hours the team had flown close to the ground and remained undetected until they got closer to their objective. Mike was beginning to think their luck had changed and they'd be able to sneak in, deliver the package and get out.

Fortunately the Lone Wolf was not that naïve so hadn't let his guard down. Almost immediately after the UNSC ship had committed to flying through a barren canyon cut into the drab brown terrain the Covenant swarmed in on the Pelican flown by Commander Carter.

A flight of Banshees followed by a Phantom using its heavy plasma autocannon in a gunship role came screaming in trying to put the heavily armored aircraft on the ground. Carter showed considerable flying skill juking and weaving throughout the narrowing rocky obstacle. Mike and Emile used their personal weapons, firing from the open rear ramp to try to keep the vultures off their tail.

Mike had successfully fired a stream of armor piercing rounds from his Assault Rifle into the engine of one of the Banshees causing it to blow up and throw its mates off track. Going full throttle through the canyon the Spartans thought they might make it until two more Banshees came swooping down out of the late afternoon sun. Unable to maneuver the two nimble Covenant attack crafts fired a full salvo of plasma and fuel rod projectiles into the cockpit. The nose of the Pelican dropped dangerously and the engines screamed in protest until the heavy aircraft righted itself.

"Noble Leader, seek immediate medical attention," Auntie Dot called out to Commander Carter urgently over the comms.

Mike and Emile looked at each other, knowing the other had the same concern for their team leader despite not being able to see facial expressions behind their visors.

"You go check on the commander," Emile urged Mike. "I'll hold the fort back here."

"Roger that," Mike confirmed and turned to move back through the nearly seven meter long troop bay to the cockpit.

"Noble Leader, please respond," the AI called out again, concern etching her voice.

Mike continued to move towards the front of the craft, holding on to

stabilize himself despite the weight of his armor in the bobbing dropship. But then the pursuing Covenant ground support craft let loose a salvo from its twin cannons. The hot plasma cut through the armored skin of the dropship and splashed Mike as he passed, draining his shields precariously. The alarm claxon went off, warning him to find cover, but he didn't care. He wanted to get to Carter as quick as he could.

Fortunately, as the next Banshee set up for another pass Emile fired a precisely placed round from his Grenade Launcher, hitting the lead craft. The resulting EMP burst the explosion caused disabled the lead Banshee causing it to crash into its wingman. Even though the Phantom still pursued for the moment the volatile Spartan had bought them some time.

For Mike, he didn't like what he saw as he entered the cockpit. Commander Carter had removed his helmet and dropped it to the deck. Blood spatters on the cockpit window and the state of their team leader told him all he needed to know.

"Please respond, Sierra Two-Five-Nine. You are alarming me," Auntie Dot pleaded again.

Commander Carter ignored the entreaty and instead turned to Mike. Face bloodied and armor charred from plasma fire, he declared, "Not sure how long she's gonna stay together. Skies are jammed up anyways. Gotta get you off here, lieutenant."

Revulsion at what he knew was coming overwhelmed Mike. For nearly his whole career he'd worked alone and now not only had he begun to work with people but he cared for them and now they were being taken from him one-by-one. He grabbed the pilot's chair and began to plead, "Sir, you-"

But Carter cut him off. "Don't wanna hear it. Get the Package to the Autumn."

Mike could see the hole from the Fuel Rod Round that had penetrated Carter's armor from the Banshee's class-2 Projectile Cannon and knew it was not a matter of 'if' but 'when' for the Spartan who was holding it together despite the incredible pain he must have been in from the inch-and-a-half long fuel rod lodged deep in his chest.

The tormented Spartan knew there was no other option. "Done," was all Mike could say, feeling his heart coming up into his mouth.

"Not yet, it's not," Carter answered grimly, staying focused despite the pain. "Emile, go with him. It's a ground game now."

Emile turned and looked the length of the Pelican to see his team leader, who he'd been through so much with, saying goodbye. Pumping his left shoulder with his fist in salute the warrant officer responded, "It's been an honor, sir."

"Likewise...", Carter let the word drift for a moment as thoughts of their past together flashed into his mind. He smiled, knowing he'd served with people he counted as friends. "I'll do what I can to draw their fire."

"I wish things had turned out differently," Mike said quietly. "But I

appreciate you giving me a chance. It was an honor to serve with you. Thank you."

Carter snorted. "You earned your place on Noble Team, son." Taking the offered hand he shook it and then turned back to the controls. "Six. That AI chose you... She made the right choice."

Mike moved back to the still open ramp at the rear and rejoined Emile. The two looked at each other but said nothing as the Pelican curved sharply down a break in the canyon at the last moment causing the pursuing Covenant aircraft to miss the turn and lose sight. The two remaining Spartans crouched down on the ramp at the Pelican's tail, getting ready to jump. Mike held the AI data storage unit close to his chest.

"On my mark!" Carter called back, getting a surge of adrenaline and holding his fingers up for a countdown. As he moves to zero the leader of Noble Team pumped his fist and gave the signal. "Mark!"

Mike and Emile jumped, free-falling down, missing the ledge they'd tried to hit due to the speed of the Pelican. The two Spartans bounced and slide down the canyon wall until they rested on the ground, safe for the moment, but a long way from their objective.

38. Chapter 38

****Chapter 38****

****August 30, 2552 16:55 Hours Aszod, Eposz, Planet Reach****

Mike got to his feet and couldn't help shaking his head to clear it. His MJOLNIR armor protected him during the fall but it didn't mean he hadn't been shaken up. But more than that, Commander Carter's last words to him before he and Emile had jumped stuck in his mind: _That AI chose you... She made the right choice._

Maybe he was beginning to believe but a renewed confidence surged through the troubled man. He'd complete the mission.

Mike picked up Cortana's storage unit and checked it over. Though he'd dropped it when he jarred to a halt the blue, glowing unit was intact. He couldn't help but wonder what she was like. He'd interacted with AI's before many times but something told him this one was different.

That AI chose you.

"She chose me." The Lone Wolf said quietly to himself. The Spartan's reflections though were cut short as the sound of aircraft overhead interrupted him. Carter's Pelican flew past them with two Banshees in hot pursuit still outpacing the smaller craft despite one engine being on fire. Mike couldn't help but admire the piloting skill of Noble One.

"Come on, let's go," Emile came over and encouraged him with a nod of his head.

Mike looked around and realized they'd fallen into a narrow ravine with a winding dirt road through it. A waypoint popped up as he checked his weapons. Finding them undamaged he racked a round into the chamber of his Assault Rifle and the two Spartans began to trot down the road.

A short time later the pair went through a narrow crack in the ravine decorated only with a few clusters of brown tumbleweed to come onto a cliff edge overlooking a large area.

"Still with us, commander?" Emile called over the comms as the pair watched the Pelican and pursuing Covenant craft juking through the air.

"Stay low; let me draw the heat," Carter responded tensely. "You just deliver that Package."

"There's our destination, Six: _Pillar of Autumn," _Emile declared as their objective could be seen in the distance. "Race you to her."

As Carter's Pelican zooms away into the distance, the two Spartans move from the cliff face to a narrow dirt and rock strewn path that wound its way down into the valley below. Staying in cover and moving quickly they made it to the floor to find prominent nearby a hard-packed dirt highway strewn with destroyed vehicles. Also prominent was a group of Covenant going through the remains of what appeared to have been a military convoy heading towards their objective. The distracted Covenant seemed to be watching the dramatics overhead so didn't see the approaching Spartans who charged right into them.

Leading with a grenade Mike unnerved a group of Grunts exploring an overturned transport truck. The squat creatures yelled in alarm and scattered as expected. Emile took two of the retreating creatures down with quick shotgun blasts while Mike shredded a third. But coming from behind another wrecked vehicle an Elite roared a challenge and opened fire with a Plasma Pistol. Blue streaks of plasma whizzed past as the Spartan charged in Assault Rifle taking down the Sangheili's overshield. Without stopping Mike bashed relentlessly into the maw of the screaming warrior, beating it to death.

As Emile mopped up the remnant of the Covenant left from their initial assault Mike noticed a trio of Jackals form up and lock their energy shields together blocking a curving concrete bridge over another deep ravine.

"Push through 'em, Mike," Emile called out, "I got your back."

The Lone Wolf knew he wasn't alone in this and that gave him a measure of comfort despite all his losses of late. Notwithstanding their earlier rocky start the two Spartans were now brothers.

Needing no further encouragement Mike charged in as Needler rounds flew around him and Plasma bolts splashed. As he got closer he threw a grenade causing the Kig-Yar to pull back behind their shields which was exactly what he wanted them to do. Lowering his shoulder the bulky Spartan bulled through the avian creatures sending two tumbling through the air. The third he smashed into the concrete with the butt

end of his rifle then turned and shredded a second just as Emile joined him to gun down the third.

Slapping a fresh mag into his Assault Rifle Mike kept pushing on, coming up to a flat-roofed building that looked like a check point. Moving inside the Spartan found that it was indeed a military installation so took the opportunity to forge for more supplies. He heard the sharp _boom _of a shotgun so sprinted out to find Emile finishing off a few stray Grunts.

"That felt good," the aggressive Spartan commented.

Mike snorted but said nothing. He checked his waypoint and realized they still had a long way to go to complete their mission and time was running out.

As if reading his mind Emile looked around and spotted a pair of Mongoose ATV's. Getting Mike's attention, he announced, "Got transport."

Commander Carter took a moment from his flying to notice below with satisfaction the two remaining Spartans driving away in the quick ATV. So far luck had been on his side and he'd been able to keep the Pelican in the sky despite the hot pursuit. He couldn't help but feel a swelling of pride at his Spartans despite the searing pain of his own wounds.

Yes, they were his Spartans. Even Mike-B312. He couldn't help but think of the previous Noble Six. Had it only been since April? He couldn't believe it. So much had happened in the past four month. Carter still blamed himself for Thom-293's death. Yes, Colonel Holland had blamed the brash Spartan for charging into that Covenant battlecruiser at Fumirole and detonating that nuke but he had still been in charge of the mission. When Mike had joined them as the new Six he'd thought he'd been getting another cowboy but instead he'd gotten so much more. The Lone Wolf hadn't lived up to his name. He was a team player and even seemed to relish being in the small family known as Noble Team.

A shrinking family, Carter thought to himself. Jorge was gone, Kat too. Jun was away and who knows what would happen to himâ€¦

Carter let the thought drift a bit as the loss of blood made him light-headed. The impact of plasma fire on his ship brought him back to reality. No, he was going to die here on Reach, the others likely as well. The planet was lost, he knew that, but they'd complete the mission. What had Halsey said? _When Reach falls - and it will fall - our annihilation is all but certain. Unless...we can glean from this artifact a defense against the Covenant_. This is a game changer._

"A game changer," Noble One mused to himself taking some comfort that all was not lost, that there was still hope. "Okay doc, Noble'll get the job done," he said again, rebalancing the engine trim so he could keep flying.

On the ground, Emile and Mike had been making excellent time on the Mongoose. They'd shot past several small Covenant patrols before they could react. Continuing through a tall, narrow ravine strewn with more destroyed UNSC vehicles they had good cover until the road

opened up into another open plain. Mike hit the accelerator and picked up speed as the road straightened but as they pressed on to the other side of the valley a loud _thud _nearby caused them to look and they saw Covenant Heavy Orbital Insertion Pods drop all around. Popping open Covenant troops emerged and began to form up. Worse still, a massive Scarab Ultra Heavy Assault Platform dropped from the sky right in front of them.

"Scarab! Do _not_ engage!" Emile called to Mike urgently, "Gun it, Six!"

The heavy weapons platform seemed to have discovered the pair of Spartans and moved to attack but Commander Carter flew past it and opened fire with the Pelican's 40mm rotary nose cannon distracting the Scarab.

"Get the Package out of there," Carter ordered over the comms. "Remember your objective!"

Mike revved the engine and sped up. More Orbital Insertion Pods dropped disgorging their inhabitants. Needler and Plasma fire lanced through the air but the speed of the small ATV made it difficult to hit. Emile fired randomly at targets as they appeared from the rear but he had no better luck than the Covenant. Another gigantic Scarab dropped from the sky right in their path but the Lone Wolf gunned the engine and sped right through the legs of the quadripedal bug-like platform. A short distance later the pair of Spartans entered a tunnel and got a bit of a respite.

"Fun, huh?" Emile whooped from behind.

"Yea, loads," Mike responded blandly.

"Ah come on Wolf, you want to live forever?"

"No, just long enough to get the job done."

"That's the spirit brother," Emile slapped him on the shoulder as they came back out onto the narrow track winding back through another ravine. A Phantom now joined the fray, trying to splash the Mongoose. Mike started to weave a bit on the maneuverable ATV avoiding any damage.

The span of a bridge appeared just ahead and at the same time both Spartans saw the same thing.

"The bridge ahead is out, Six," Emile yelled. "We're gonna have to jump it!"

Mike gunned the engine anew and the 1000cc liquid-cooled engine whined giving the bike all the power it could. Saying a quick prayer Mike involuntarily closed his eyes as the Mongoose left the concrete and flew through the air as the Phantom tried to knock it out of the void. Landing hard on the other side the Spartans made the jump but came upon another obstacle. Another checkpoint was beyond the bridge but this one's big steel barricades were in place blocking their way.

"Gotta go on foot from here," Mike called to Emile as each checked the load in their weapons and moved through the abandoned building

looking to scavenge supplies.

"Noble, enemy forces blocking the road up ahead," Commander Carter warned them from on high, miraculously still in the air and alive.

"Now that's a surprise," Emile declared sarcastically.

Pushing quickly into the new area another destroyed UNSC column of vehicles was being picked over by the Covenant. The invaders command-and-control didn't seem to be overly connected since the mixture of Grunts and Jackals paused rather than react to see the two charging Spartans coming. By the time the group of Elites who were supposed to be supervising the point realized what was going on Mike and Emile had fought their way through and had disappeared into a nearby cave.

The winding natural structure going through the mountain range provided a respite for the two Spartans. Nothing was showing on their IFFs so they allowed it as an opportunity for a respite. Travelling through the winding passage it began to climb and become lighter as it was evident the exit was approaching.

"Noble! You got a...situation," Commander Carter called out urgently over the comms.

As the two Spartans approached the exit a Scarab walked down in front of them, blocking the way. Its main gun began to glow green as it prepared to fire.

"Mother... We can't get past it, sir!" Emile called out. The aggressive Spartan began to back up in hesitation, Mike hugged the wall.

"No you can't," Carter confirmed. "Not without help."

"Commander, you don't have the firepower!" Emile protested.

Aiming its main cannon at the two Spartan III's the Scarab prepared to fire until Commander Carter's Pelican flew over it peppering the massive assault platform with fire from its main gun. The tactic did the trick and Scarab changed its focus the Spartans to the pesky aircraft

"I've got the mass," Carter confirmed.

"Solid copy," Emile confirmed, his voice breaking slightly at the intent of his team leader. "Hit 'em hard, boss."

"You're on your own, Noble... Carter out."

Commander Carter put on full thrusters and rammed the Pelican into the Scarab's side as it charged its main cannon again. The Scarab's side burst into orange flames, explosions rocking within it. The Covenant platform let out an almost dying scream and struggled to stay on the cliff. More explosions rocked it and though desperately trying to remain upright it toppled down the cliff along with Carter's crashed Pelican. A deafening explosion erupted from the floor below indicating its destruction.

"My god," Mike whispered.

"Crevice to the east," Emile reported without emotion but trying to hold it together. "Let's go."

Mike couldn't move. The image of Carter sacrificing himself for them scorched in his mind with all the other memories he'd collected of late.

"Six, come on," Emile ordered but he couldn't get his partner to move. It was all too much for the beleaguered Lone wolf.

"Come on Mike, let's make all this shit worth it," Emile came over, putting his hand on the Spartan's shoulder kindly and standing visor to visor.

Mike snapped out of his funk. "You're right. Let's make it count," he declared, inserting a fresh magazine into his Assault Rifle.

The pair continued on, staying close to the mountain wall on the narrow, sandy ledge. As they moved closer to the opening to the next cave system Mike paused and slid over to the side to look down. He hoped to see the Pelican or Commander Carter but knew their team leader was gone. Emile paused and allowed him the moment, saying nothing. Kicking the dirt in anger but saying nothing Six pressed on.

Entering the cave they could see the UNSC had tried to defend it. Dead Army troopers and broken equipment littered the entrance. The two Spartans tensed as red dots lit up their IFFs. Then they saw what had taken out the guard.

"Buggers," Emile confirmed they were Covenant flying drones. "Go quiet."

The pair tried to use the rocks and shadows to move through the hostiles but it was to no avail. The insectoid drones detected the humans and immediately engaged.

Attacking in pairs, the hard to hit armored flying attack platforms bobbed and weaved trying to stop the Spartans. It took several Shotgun rounds or sustained fire from the Assault Rifle to take one down and as a pair was eliminated another would enter the fray. Mike and Emile continued to push forward, taking the drones down but there were always more. Fortunately the drone's weapons were lighter Plasma Rifles since they were scoring numerous direct hits but doing little damage to the Spartan's shields. Still, they were an impediment and slowing the pair's progress. But the Buggers were no match for the Spartans and so were eliminated.

Coming to a ledge in the cave Mike jumped first into a pool of water collecting at the bottom only to be attacked by a party of Skirmishers blocking the path. These were easier to fight than the pesky drones so with Emile backing him Mike punched through the avian creatures that were not designed to fighting in close quarters. The two Spartans almost relished the opportunity to fight these creatures after watching their leader sacrifice himself. The last of the Skirmishers tried to flee but Emile grabbed it by the neck, hauled it back and then with satisfaction sliced the creature's throat with his Kukri.

All threats eliminated, they were able to continue on finding the exit to the cave a short time later. Before them, slightly below the entrance, was the sprawling industrial complex of the Sinovet Heavy Machinery Company. Their ship breaking facility here in Aszod was massive with the remains of hundreds of starships lying in their ship graveyard. Prominent in the terrain was the remains of the UNSC Commonwealth which had been in the process of being disassembled when the invasion had begun but the expansive industrial facilities were now the scene of an intense firefight.

What once had been a jewel for this province of industrialization was nothing more than a scrap yard of grounded and wrecked UNSC hardware. But more disturbing to the Spartans was the area was also a massive battlefield between the UNSC troops trying to hold the last dock in the region for them and massing Covenant troops trying to dislodge them.

"Spartans! Over here!" a female UNSC trooper who had spotted them called out urgently, as a new waypoint popped up on their HUD's

"This is Captain Keyes of the Pillar of Autumn," an older but authoritative voice added. "We are tracking you Noble and have begun our launch sequence. Proceed to drydock, platform D. I'll be on it myself to receive the package."

"We'll be there, sir," Emile confirmed.

"You better be soldier, because my countdown has no abort," Keyes answered dryly.

"Understood. We've got to get to the dry dock. Priority One," Emile confirmed. Then looking at Mike he added, "Well Six, it's show time."

The two Spartans hopped over the edge and jumped into the maw of battle.

Landing on the roof of a single story administrative structure the pair began to open fire as they assessed the situation. They could see a group of what looked like mixed UNSC troops desperately trying to hold an opening into the main facility.

Hopping down the Spartans began to move systematically through the approach eliminating the mixed company of Grunts and Skirmishers. Mike began to realize the importance of this fight when he soon realized the Grunts were not falling back as they normally would when engaged but instead were pressing forward. A squad of Elites waded in, adding to the din of combat. Led by a gold-armored general, they fought ferociously to keep the two Spartans from linking up with the other human troops. But using grenades and concentrated fire the added weight of Mike and Emile to the fight allowed the humans to prevail.

Entering into the structure Mike was surprised to see the opening had been held by four Army troopers and two Marines. The NCO in charge wore the stripes of a UNSC Army Master Sergeant.

"You the one's we're waiting for?" the sergeant asked, keeping his

gaze on the approach as the beaten Covenant tried to reform.

"Yes, we are," Mike replied. "Noble Six and Noble Four."

"Lawrence Buckah, 34th Infantry Brigade," the senior NCO held out his hand for Mike. "Drydock's through that structure. Punch through. We'll back you up."

Mike shook the offered hand and assessed the master sergeant who looked near to retirement. A shock of thinning white hair and paunch at the belly betrayed a soldier who'd been sitting behind a desk for the past few years. "You sure you're up for this, master sergeant?" he asked.

Buckah snorted. "Sonny, I may have been out of the fight for a bit but I still remember how to get the job done. Yea, we can keep up," he declared, loading shells into the shotgun he carried.

Emile let out a belly laugh at the brash comment from the senior soldier and joined in. "I bet you can. Come on, let's move out."

With Mike on the point, Emile a step back to his right and Buckah and the remaining troopers they pushed into the factory trying to link up with Captain Keyes and deliver their package. Any hope that the Covenant had been kept out of the massive structure was futile. The place was overrun with them.

Despite that, like a spear thrust the party moved fast through the corridors of the building, easily pushing aside the opposition since nothing seemed overly organized. Then the building shook from a nearby impact.

"That was close," Emile commented.

"Yea, we need to pick up the pace," Mike responded looking back and noticing all the troopers were still with them, including the older senior NCO was right behind Emile.

Coming into an office area with a shattered glass window they found two UNSC Marines taking a covering position at the door to a metal grated platform.

"Follow us," Mike ordered, not stopping, but instead moving out onto the balcony.

The area looked like it had been used for smelting and here the Covenant were formed up in a defensive position.

"Spread out into fire teams," Noble Six called out. "We need to clear this area before we can move on."

Grunts, Jackals and Elites had spread out and found good cover on the workshop floor dominated by a large, still bubbling, cauldron of molten iron. In one bound Mike leapt over the rail on top of a Grunt, crushing the creature before smashing his fist through the shield of a Jackal who came up to challenge him.

Emile and the rest of the team surged into the room and the firefight was on. The humans had to concentrate in the close quarters not to

hit each other. The Covenant on the other hand were not so discerning and several were taken out by direct fire from their own side. Emile blasted a Grunt at close range causing its Methane Tank to explode. The creature was sent high in the air and landed with a plop into the liquid metal cauldron. The impact caused a splash over the side which seared two Jackals. Mike caught sight of this and seeing a trio of armored Elites forming up to attack the less well armored soldiers he tossed a grenade into the cauldron beside where they were. While the impact did nothing the geyser of molten metal that erupted burned right through the Elite's armor and burned them to death.

Despite a sharp fight it was shorter than expected and the humans held the smelting floor. Mike looked around noting Emile had already moved to the large double bay door that opened to another part of the complex. He saw that two of the Army troopers were down but other than a slight shrapnel wound on the arm Master Sergeant Buckah was still with them.

"Drydocks are through that area, sir," Buckah commented pointing through the bay doors Emile guarded, as he reached down and grabbed the dog tags of the fallen soldiers. "We need to push on."

"Roger that," Mike answered, "all of you," he added for the Marines they'd picked up, "you're with me."

Coming outside briefly into a sunny day Mike saw a Phantom dropping off more troops nearby. Feeling the storage unit with Cortana on his back despite the armor between his body, he realized that this was going to be a close run thing and despite how far they'd come this was far from being concluded.

Moving through the open area to a gangway leading to the drydock they had a brief time of respite from attack. Thinking perhaps they'd flanked the enemy the party picked up speed but they were wrong. Moving into the open structure, the humans were confronted by a pair of hulking Covenant warriors.

"Hunters!" one of the Marines called out, a note of fear in his voice.

"Let us handle this sarge, cover our backs," Mike ordered Buckah, charging in.

Emile went for one while Mike tangled with the other. The two Spartans had a moment's edge since the Mgalekgolo seemed surprised by their rapid arrival. But the lumbering juggernauts reacted quickly. Dropping their large arm shields into a defensive position the pair charged their assault cannons to fire.

Emile got one round in before his fired. It clipped the Spartan sending him tumbling. Mike fired an ineffective burst from his Assault Rifle then deftly switched to his own Shotgun. Seeing Noble Four down he slid off of his own target to drawn fire. Another blast slammed into a shipping container turning it into splinters which Mike dodged but with a mighty power-assisted jump he went up and over Hunter and pumped two rounds into its exposed back. The beast went down with a scream just as Emile got back up.

With a howl, the Hunter's unharmed mate fired at Mike while charging directly into Emile. The Lone Wolf was blown back by the plasma burst

into a metal support post while Emile was knocked aside like a rag doll and stunned.

Mike's shield was down and he couldn't get out of the way of the enraged Hunter who roared in approval at the anticipated revenge. But before it could fire Master Sergeant Buckah came flying into the room firing a shotgun blast into the vulnerable rear of the behemoth. The Hunter roared in anger and turned from Mike to the elderly NCO who with surprising deftness skipped out of the swipe of the massive creature's shield to deliver another shotgun blast. In a frenzy, the Mgalekgolo thrashed around but again Buckah moved ahead of the beast and fired one last killing blow. As the beast fell to the deck with a _thud_ both Mike and Emile got to their feet, their shields regenerated.

"Thanks for the help," Mike congratulated the older NCO.

"Told you I could keep up," Buckah responded with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

Emile couldn't help but laugh. "Slapping the enigmatic master sergeant on the back he declared, "Come on, we got more building to clear."

And clear it they did.

With a new confidence in the troops backing them up Mike and Emile aggressively entered into the drydock area of the complex.

The area was thick with Covenant, Elites especially, slowing the progress of the humans and their mission to deliver the AI to Captain Keyes. But breaking again into fire teams and with the Spartans bobbing and jumping around they were able to continue to press through. Mike stayed focused on the waypoint he was heading towards and they had the advantage of no longer having to hold a position. In addition, they began to pick up more Marines who'd been holding positions strengthening their force. Pressing towards the fallback point they were again able to gain momentum.

Finally clearing the drydocks the Spartans and UNSC troopers moved into a maintenance area and upwards floor by floor. On the upper level they picked up some more Marines and headed down a small corridor when a significant explosion rocked the structure and unbalanced even the Spartans while causing the lights to flicker.

"Keyes to Noble team. We're running out of time here Spartans!" Captain Keyes called over the comms desperately.

"Solid copy sir!" Emile responded. "We're en route."

"Can't slow down," Mike commented, "Got to keep pressing."

"Yea," Emile agreed, "but I think we're getting close. Check out the waypoint."

Mike could see his teammate was correct. They were close. Pushing through the corridor they could hear the sound of small arms fire so picked up the pace. Entering a large storage room, they came upon two Marines holding a defensive position on their own. A Jackal with a

Plasma Rifle and a section of Grunts were trying to press through and into the corridor they were blocking.

The Lone Wolf didn't wait. Charging in he blasted at the Jackal with his Assault Rifle who reflexively dropped down behind its energy shield. Mike expected this so charged in shoulder down bulling through the lighter creature's stance turning the shield aside. He then cracked his armored elbow down onto the avian's snout, stunning it. As it fell he stomped on the Jackal's head repeatedly, hearing a satisfying crack as the skull collapsed. While two of the Grunts fired at him with Plasma Pistols his MJOLNIR armor absorbed the shots long enough for Emile, Master Sergeant Buckah and the rest of the force to stream in and drop the pesky creatures. Three Skirmishers waded into the room, dropping one of the Marines who let his guard down but a hail of armor piercing bullets stopped the creatures.

"Thanks for the assist, sir," a Marine corporal acknowledged Mike. "We got a strong point down that corridor we're holding and a Casualty Collection Point there too. Platform D is just beyond. Covvies have kicked the hell out of us but we held," he declared with pride.

Mike looked at the young man who couldn't be older than twenty and could see the determination in his eyes. He was impressed anew at these people willing to fight this desperate battle to help him and Emile out.

"Good job, corporal," he congratulated the man and patted him on the back, causing the young Marine to beam. "We really appreciate it. Keep up the good work. We'll leave some men with you to bolster the position. Buckah, take care of it."

"Got it, sir," the sergeant responded without hesitation and pointed out half the group as Mike and Emile moved down the corridor.

Mike entered the room as Emile pushed forward. He saw that a small covering force held the exit and the platform. But he also noticed a large number of covered bodies laid out in a row along with a half-dozen troopers being treated by a medic who had her back to him. "Who's in charge here?" he asked somberly, seeing the price it had cost to make this possible for them.

An Army lieutenant with red hair and penetrating eyes stepped forward. "That would be me. Dick Winters," the junior officer introduced himself. "Sure glad to finally see you guys. We're holding the dock but barely. Covvies have laid on a few assaults but we've held. Seems though they're massing, so our window of opportunity is closing. I'll advise Captain Keyes. Sorry, got to get back to work."

Mike nodded his head, again moved by the dedication of the troops and was reminded anew of Natalia who had left. Anger flared but he kept it under control. He turned to Sergeant Buckah who awaited orders. "Get that wound of yours looked after and the others too but do it fast. Everyone else holds the line."

Buckah saluted and moved off with a spring in his step they didn't reflect his years.

The Lone Wolf checked his ammo count and changed magazines in his Assault Rifle plus reloaded his shotgun since they had a lull in the action. Then he heard a familiar voice that caused him to freeze.

"Mike? Mike is that you?"

He turned around and standing five feet away from him was Mandy.

39. Chapter 39

****Chapter 39****

****August 30, 2552 19:22 Hours Aszod, Eposz, Planet Reach****

"Mandy? What are you doing here?" Mike choked out incredulously, still not believing what he was seeing.

"Me? Seeing if you were wanting to take me up on my offer," the attractive medic responded with a sassy grin.

Mike shook his head in confusion. "Pardon?"

"You know, when I told you that you had other options besides 'what's her name'." She put her hands on her hips and declared, "I knew you'd find me."

Mike was then taken back to the hospital in New Alexandria where the striking medic had kissed him and professed a desire to be in his life. At the time he'd been confused but had felt something for the feisty woman.

Had it been less than two weeks? It seemed a lifetime ago.

Though the woman was flirting with him her dancing eyes betrayed fatigue. Heavy dark lines ringed her eyes showing a lack of sleep. The bodies around her showed why she had them.

"Mandy, Iâ€¦", he began to speak but wasn't sure what to say as the memories came flooding in. Removing his helmet his usually stoic face showed confusion which tugged at the compassionate woman's heart.

"Naw, I'm just having some fun with you. I volunteered to go with the scratch force that was put together to protect this platform along with the Kilo-40 ODST's. But I am glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you tooâ€¦", Mike said genuinely, seeing even more the deep fatigue etched on the face of the petite medic then thinking of the contrast of Natalia safe and away from all of this.

"Where's yourâ€¦", Mandy paused and measured her words, "friend?" she asked, as if reading his mind.

"She was evac'd about a week ago before New Alexandria fell," Mike answered tightly.

The observant medic noted the tension in the Spartan. "Well, wasn't

that convenient for her," she added sarcastically.

Mike sighed, unsure how to respond. "What about Stacker and the others?" he changed the subject, unsure even right now of what he felt so not feeling like defending the privileged woman.

"The gunny?" Mandy saw he wasn't taking her bait, "he and the others came with us and are on the Pillar of Autumn."

"Did all our guys make it out of New Alexandria?"

"Yes, they did. They're all on the ship ready to receive your package," she said noting the containment unit on his back. "I'm not surprised it was you on this mission."

Mike was about to respond but Sergeant Buckah walked over. "Perimeter's secure, lieutenant. What are your orders?" the older NCO confirmed.

The Lone Wolf had been pleasantly surprised by not only the spirit of the man but his fighting spirit as well. The trooper seemed better suited for a Lay-Z-Boy but instead had proven himself to be a warrior. "Hold the line, sarge," Mike responded, "Buy us time to get the package to the Autumn. Oh, and master sergeant, thanks for all you did getting us here. We couldn't have made it without you."

"You take care of yourself, son," Buckah answered, a gleam of pride in his blue eyes. "I'll see you around."

As the unusual Army trooper walked away Mike commented, "He's quite the guy."

Mandy nodded her head in agreement. "Yea, he's kind of been like a father to us. Anyways, Mike," she paused, as if measuring her words. "I don't know if it makes any difference at this point but the things I told you before, they still hold. I care about you, a lot, and have thought about you since then. I'm glad I can be here with you at the end."

The woman's eyes became glassy but no tears fell. Instead she took his gloved hand and squeezed it affectionately.

Mike could feel his heart being gripped and emotions beginning to well up. "Mandyâ€¦Iâ€¦I wish we had more time. I mean, what I'm trying to say is-"

Emile broke in. "Time to go Six," he said without emotion looking hard at Mandy from behind his skull-carved visor. "We got to get it in gear."

The now emotional woman gave Mike a hug despite the bulk of his armor and went back to her work as Mike put his helmet back on.

The volatile Spartan snorted at the scene but said nothing. Instead he called out to a nearby Marine who seemed to be in charge asking, "What's the situation?"

"We rigged a Mass Driver up top," the Marine responded. "We lose that, the Autumn will have no covering fire. She'll never make orbit."

The pair of Spartans headed down a hallway guarded by two more Marines and then exited outside and onto Platform D.

"Noble to Keyes: we're at the pad," Emile reported.

"Copy, Noble. My Pelican's ready," Captain Keyes responded over the comms. "Clear an LZ and I'll meet you there."

"Will do, sir," Emile confirmed then turned to Mike, "All right, Six, this is it. I'll man the big gun. You just get to the platform and deliver that Package."

Mike's head was swirling from the unexpected meeting with Mandy and her confirmation of the affections she had that seemed unchanged but he was also professional enough to shake it off. Looking around he saw the multi-level platform had several entry points from outside the structure making it a nightmare to try to contain. Already Covenant Phantoms were dropping infantry who were moving in to assault the position.

"All right, Lieutenant Winters, hold the structure and provide covering fire. I'll clear the pad for the captain; Noble Four will keep the skies clear with the Mass Driver. Don't risk yourself unnecessarily."

"Roger that," Winters confirmed and troopers began to show themselves at every possible opening in the building facing the landing pad.

"I'm in position, I'll take out as many dropships as I can," Emile confirmed as the Onager Magnetic Acceleration Cannon on the roof of the building came to life.

Mike watched the mass of troops forming and reminded himself that fighting the Covenant was way less complex than trying to figure out feelings.

The Spartan didn't wait for the attackers to form up. Instead he changed down a gangway and went right after them. Opening fire with his Assault Rifle had scattered a group of Grunts sending them screaming in all directions. Several Jackals moved in trying to pin the Lone Wolf into the corner of the platform but Mike instead tossed a grenade to short out their energy shields then dropped them with sustained fire.

Continuing to move he ejected an empty magazine and slapped a new one in as the sound of the Mass Driver beginning to fire filled the air. He heard the electromagnetic linear motor of the Onager whine to life and then spit out a 15cm ferric-tungsten slug at an approaching Covenant gunship.

A squad of Jackals uncharacteristically tried to encircle him rather than snipe from the periphery. Moving into position they fired from behind their energy shields approaching slowly in the squeeze the circle. Mike took numerous hits, especially from the rear, and could see his shields dropping. Knowing he couldn't be trapped in this position the Spartan charged at the closest two lowering his shoulder to bull through the lighter avian creatures. Once out of the cordon he began to systematically move around the Jackals who were still

trying to reform and blew them away.

As if reflecting the growing mood of futility among the defenders clouds had begun to quickly move in as the wind picked up and rain started to pelt the platform.

Mike could see even more Covenant troops forming to assault the position so switched to his shotgun, knowing he was going into close quarters. Emile had taken out several Phantoms with the Mass Driver but there were just too many to stop them all. Mike was receiving good covering fire through from Lt. Winters and Master Sergeant Buckah so could concentrate of moving freely around the platform and eliminating the surging hostiles.

The Spartan thought they might be in the clear until a group of Brutes came charging in, their guttural yells rising above the din of battle. Mike was glad he'd switched to his shotgun. Using his speed to advantage over the lumbering 500 kilo Jiralhanae he danced around firing shots at vulnerable points much to their frustration. Despite his success at dropping several there were too many. Worse still, they were beginning to press towards the building and the access gangway to the Mass Driver. Mike had to draw them away. Knowing their blood lust was up he focused on one of their leaders. Killing the beast with a flurry of grenades he moved off the platform to the ground below. Predictably the enraged Brutes followed him forgetting their mission, trying to kill the Spartan.

The rain was starting to turn the ground muddy so Mike knew he had to be careful with his footing, slipping as he ran around a large rock and almost falling down. Still he was thinning their ranks out but unfortunately another wave joined and the Spartan began to lose the initiative.

Crystalline rounds from Needler Rifles buzzed through the air as well as the arcing plasma projectiles of Concussion Rifles forced Mike onto the defensive. In their overwhelming berserk killing-rage the aggressive foes were too many for the Spartan to handle. They began to score hits and he watched his shields begin to drop in his HUD. Knowing he needed to fall back Mike looked for a place to regroup.

Moving into one of the outer buildings on the platform to allow his shields to regenerate Mike saw they'd been loaded with UNSC weapons and ammo. Grabbing several handfuls of shotgun shells and assault rifle magazines he spotted a rack with a half dozen M319 Individual Grenade Launchers. Knowing this would even the score with the Brutes he grabbed one. The Lone Wolf involuntarily paused for a moment when he saw the words Misriah Armory prominent on the side.

Will I ever be free of reminders of how far apart Natalia's world is from mine? Mike thought to himself. But then there was Mandy. She was here and she was available. Yea, and we'll both likely be dead within the hour, he reminded himself fatalistically.

A grenade from a Brute Shot exploded in the room reminding Mike he still had a war to fight. Charging out the door he fired a grenade at a surging Brute. It caught the beast square in the chest before it blew up. Using the break action of the weapon he pumped another round into the chamber and fired again.

The Spartan went through all 15 rounds in the launcher's magazine. Tossing the empty weapon aside he ran back into the shelter, grabbed another one, and repeated the process. Using this approach he was able to clear the attackers from the pad having a momentary lull to catch his breath. The remaining Covenant stayed off the deck but rather hovered around the periphery allowing Mike to collect his thoughts.

"Six, watch your back!" Emile called out urgently from his perch above the battle at the Mass Driver.

Mike looked up and saw a Phantom right above him. The whole compliment of the Covenant dropship unloaded on top of him. There was little opportunity to fire the grenade launcher. Instead he used it as a bludgeon, beating the horde of Grunts and Jackals around him. But worse for the Spartan was a new sections of Brutes dropped in as well. Surrounding him and using the Grunts as fodder, they systematically began establishing a cordon around Mike. He began taking various hits from their weapons causing his shield to drop. Try as he might, he couldn't break out. Several times Mike tried to bull through to gain space to move but each time two of the heavy Brutes would lock up and physically toss him back. Desperation began to build as the other Covenant rallied and surged back onto the deck while he could do nothing to stop it. Worse still, he was close to zero shields and his alarm claxon was frantically going off.

Then with a _whoosh_ a tightly fired 102mm HEAT round from a Jackhammer rocket launcher slammed into a concentration of Brutes blowing them up. That allowed Mike to push through and have his shield regenerate. Looking for the source of the rocket he saw Master Sergeant Buckah standing on a balcony firing another round from the M41SSR.

"Thanks sarge, I owe you one," Mike called over the comms while looking at him.

"One? No, that's two you owe me, sonny," the gregarious white-haired NCO called back playfully.

Mike couldn't help but laugh at the comment which lightened his heart. With renewed energy the Spartan counter attacked. Leading with his Assault Rifle he fired on a Brute charging him with a Gravity Hammer. The rounds stung the beast and caused it involuntarily to drop the weapon and cover its face. Mike charged right in, bashing away at the Brute, causing the Jiralhanae's helmet to fly in the air from the force until he stove in its face. Switching to a grenade launcher the Lone Wolf pumped two rounds into another Brute, putting it down.

The growing sound of UNSC small arms fire could be heard rising above the sound of battle and Mike saw Army troopers and Marines led by Lieutenant Winters and Master Sergeant Buckah pour out of the building for one last push to eliminate the attackers without regard for their own safety. Mike couldn't help but pause and admire the sight.

With the increased firepower and Emile blowing any approaching dropships out of the sky, the defenders were able to clear the whole platform area in short order. Brutes lay in piles where they fell; the remaining Jackals had fled the scene and other than some Grunts

running around in panic on the ground outside there were no other Covenant in sight.

"Noble to Keyes, pad is clear," Emile reported, swiveling the big MAC gun looking for any targets

"On the way," Captain Keyes confirmed and almost immediately a Pelican could be seen leaving the _Pillar of Autumn_ with a second one following.

"Six, time for you to leave," Emile called out

"Roger that. I'll meet you at the landing pad," Mike reported back.

"Get the package to the pad, and get your ass off the planet," the volatile Spartan countered. "I got your back."

Knowing what his teammate meant and knowing arguing with him would be futile, Mike checked the containment unit and began moving towards the pad the Pelican was on approach to. "Lieutenant Winters, it's time to bug out," the Spartan reported. "Form your troops up and head to the pad for evac to the _Autumn_."

"Negative Noble Six," the red-haired junior officer responded. "Going with you is not our orders. We have our own evac Pelican standing by not far from here."

"Then grab it," Mike responded, surprised by the emotion that slipped into his voice. Again he was being separated from people he cared about as he thought of Mandy leaving and even the strangely compelling Master Sergeant Buckah.

As he moved through the complex towards the pad he saw both Mandy and Buckah standing there as if waiting for him. Veering over to their location he quickly climbed a set of stairs to where they were.

"What are you doing?" Mike exclaimed, though secretly glad to see them both. "You need to be moving to your extraction point."

"She said she wouldn't go without saying goodbye to you," Buckah exclaimed, gesturing to a now sheepish looking Mandy.

"Mike, it was good to see you again and yes, I did want to say goodbye," Mandy jumped in, a look of resolve replacing the previous look of embarrassment on her expressive face. "But I also needed to tell you I never wanted to create confusion in your life. You're a special guy and I only want you to be happy."

Mike took the attractive chestnut haired woman's hand, deeply touched by the declaration, and replied, "Thanks, that means a lot, more than I can really express. But same thing for you, I'm glad we met. But go and find your own happiness."

Mandy's dark brown eyes sparkled as her face lit up in a brilliant smile. She took her free hand, gave her fingers a long, wet kiss and then stretched up to press them on the side of Mike's visor, leaving a slight smear. Then she dropped his hand and skipped off.

Buckah chuckled and shook his head. "Women, huh?" Then the older NCO got serious. "Listen Mike, don't do anything stupid. You're a good man and have a lot to live for no matter what it might seem like. You don't owe the UNSC your life. I know what you're thinking but forget it. The measure of a man is not in who he is but what he does." The wise man looked at him for a moment, ensuring what he'd said had sunk in then stuck out his hand. "Good luck son."

Mike shook the offered hand and was deeply touched not only by the words of the experienced soldier but that he'd taken the time to share them. Thanks Master Sergeant. You gave me a lot to think about. You take care of yourself."

Buckah slapped the Spartan on the shoulder and moved back into the building to rejoin the rest of the group moving to their evac point.

Mike could hear a smattering of small arms fire from the building but instinctively knew those who had risked their lives to help with the mission would make it out and that made him feel good.

"This is Keyes, on hot approach to Platform Delta," the captain of the Pillar of Autumn reported over the comms, bringing Mike back to the world of reality.

Moving quickly the Spartan hopped a railing and made it to Captain Keyes' LZ just as the Pelican was about to land.

Nose in, the drop ship flared on approach and did a nimble 180 degree turn to bring its lowered rear ramp to rest lightly on the deck while the second Pelican stayed in the air to provide protection for the captain's ship. A squad of ODS's filed out to take a covering position.

"Hey Six," one of them that Mike recognized as Corporal Chin from the 105th Shock ODS unit, called out as he went past.

A tall, fit officer with graying hair at the temples walked purposefully towards Mike and he knew this was the man he was to meet.

"Good to see you, Spartan. Halsey assured me I could count on you," Captain Keyes declared.

Mike was happy to hear the compliment but it still caused him to wonder as he recalled their conversation. Still, he didn't want any credit. "Not just me, sir," he declared as he handed the storage unit with Cortana in it over.

Keyes placed a comforting hand on Mike's arm. "They'll be remembered," he declared.

Mike was touched by the concern and began to move into the Pelican following the captain who had already begun to move. Both paused though as a massive shadow appeared in the sky. A Covenant CCS-class Battlecruiser pushed through the clouds, advancing towards the Pillar of Autumn.

"Cruiser, adjusting heading for the Autumn! Noble Four, I need fire on that cruiser or we're not getting out of here! Do you copy?"

Captain Keyes called out urgently.

"You'll have your window, sir," Emile declared coolly.

"Bridge, this is the Captain," Keyes called out to his ship. "We have the Package. Returning to the _Autumn_, over."

As Captain Keyes and the ODS1 escort moved back into the Pelican, Mike prepped his Designated Marksman Rifle to provide cover. Suddenly a Covenant Phantom appeared close by out of the rear of the Pelican's blind spots firing a series of plasma bolts from its forward turret at the two UNSC drop ships. The Pelican escorting Captain Keyes' ship was struck full on and burst into an orange fire ball. Out of control it spun down and crashed onto the platform where Mike stood. He dove away from the impact explosion and while the wreck burned Captain Keyes' Pelican lifted off and fled.

Mind racing, Mike readied his weapon, unsure what was going to happen and turned as the Phantom wheeled overhead towards the Mass Driver. He raised his DMR to fire but was forced to duck as the Phantom's starboard door gunner fired another barrage of plasma at him.

Instead of landing at the platform the Pelican had been on the Phantom dropped off a pair of Elite Zealots by the MAC gun providing covering fire for the _Pillar of Autumn_.

Mike could see one of the Zealots head straight for the controller's position but the other was blocked by the Mass Driver. "Emile, watch out!" he screamed over the comms.

The aggressive Spartan yelled in surprise as the first Zealot raised its Energy Sword to strike, but he reacted faster thanks to the warning and knocked the Sangheili off its feet with a shotgun blast, causing it to fall on its back to the deck.

Emile moved quickly to stand over the Zealot. He raised his shotgun and fired again point-blank into the fallen Zealot's chest, killing it. "Who's next?" he called out, the adrenaline coursing through his body.

But in his focus Emile hadn't seen the second Zealot approaching from the rear. The Elite jumped up and impaled Emile from behind with an Energy Sword, running it right through the Spartan. The Zealot then pulled the Spartan off the blade, holding Emile by the throat.

But Emile wasn't done yet.

"I'm ready! How 'bout you?" he yelled a challenge then in one motion he pulled his kukri from the sheath in his shoulder pauldron and stabbed the Zealot in the throat.

Mike felt his heart leap into his mouth as the Zealot fell taking Emile with him, his team mate and now friend's dying breaths heard above the growing din of battle. "No, not another one," Mike choked out, feeling his eyes fill with tears.

A brief window of opportunity afforded by the focus elsewhere, Captain Keyes' Pelican returns to Platform Delta.

"Lieutenant, get on board!" Corporal Chin yelled at him from the open rear ramp. "We gotta get the hell out of here!"

Mike took half a step and stopped. He looked at the Covenant Cruiser and reforming Phantoms and knew what he had to do. "Negative. I have the gun."

Turning away from the Pelican he knew it was finally his turn. Every step of the way others had sacrificed for him- Jorge, then Kat, Commander Carter and now Emile. It was time for the Lone Wolf to step up and do the same for others. "Good luck, sir."

"Good luck to you, Spartan," Captain Keyes responded, shaking his head in admiration of the willingness of the man to sacrifice himself in this way. As his Pelican lifted off he added over the comms, "Noble Six, I need you to get on that Mass Driver and cut me a path."

Mike sprinted across the landing area towards the building that housed the MAC gun. Before he could make it to the entrance a wave of Grunts surged out to stop him. His progress was momentarily impeded but the Spartan regrouped and found a way past them. Inside though he found that an Elite Field Marshal and an accompanying squad of three Sangheili Zealots had been dropped in.

Caught by surprise, Mike was almost overpowered by them. The dark violet armored Field Marshal with distinct spike protrusions on its helmet screamed a challenge and then tried to cut him up with a Plasma Sword. Nimbly the Spartan moved out of the way and then with a power-assisted jump got clear of the converging Elites. That put him in the center of a group of Unggoy including a suicide Grunt who waddled towards him with two primed Plasma Grenades. The cagey Spartan used this to his advantage and dropped the Grunt with a sustained burst of Assault Rifle fire. The Unggoy went down and the grenades detonated near the rest of the group blowing them every which way. Even more fortunate for Mike the Grunt's methane tank blew up in a yellow fog scattering the rest. This allowed him to concentrate on the Elites as he pushed through the building towards the roof and the gun he needed to man. Using salvos of 40mm grenades from the launcher he was able to drop two of the Zealots but the Field Marshal was smarter, being able to avoid the blasts. It charged in again sword swinging. This time the Lone Wolf was ready. As the Sangheili charged he deftly ducked and side-stepped the charge, sticking a Plasma Grenade he's picked up from a dead Grunt onto the warrior's back. The explosion ripped through the Elite's shield and armor. As Mike moved past he launched another grenade from his launcher at the Field Marshal, blowing it away. The remaining Zealot was stunned by the unexpected turn of events so paused long enough for Mike to charge in and bash it square in its four-mandible'd maw. Stunned, the Elite dropped its hands and Mike then beat it mercilessly to death.

Now clear the Spartan raced up to the roof and the silent Mass Driver. But he paused to look at the still form of Emile slumped dead against the rail. Before he took controls of the MAC gun Mike did grab his teammates Kukri, stuffing it into a utility pouch.

"Cruiser, moving into position," Captain Keyes called out urgently over the comms, bringing Mike back to reality. "I need it dead!"

As the Spartan reactivated the twin-railed gun a triangular targeting reticule appeared showing also the status of the unit. Fully charged and ready to go he began to traverse left and right knocking Phantoms and Banshees systematically out of the sky as it tried to stop him. Several times he fired at the cruiser but to no avail.

"Mass driver won't crack those shields! Steady, Spartan!" Keyes encouraged Mike, observing the battle from his retreating Pelican.

So Mike continued to wait for his opening, taking out more of the Covenant ships. Then Keyes saw what he was looking for. The cruiser began to charge its ventral energy projector to fire on the Pillar of Autumn. The circular unit in the center of the ship began to glow and that gave them the window of opportunity Keyes was waiting for.

"Fire! Now, lieutenant! Hit her in the gut!" Keyes called out urgently knowing they only had seconds for this to work.

Mike traversed until the targeting reticle was dead center of the glowing mass and it turned red indicating a lock. The Mass Driver's central unit began to charge. The igniter wheel spun as each of the coils began to glow. Lightning danced between the two rails as each of the five bars showing the energy level of the gun filled to the max and then Mike fired.

The blast from the Mass Driver ignited the magnetic fields guiding the building plasma, causing it to destabilize. A massive explosion rocked the Covenant ship and it turned nose down and crashed into the surface of the planet.

"Good guns, Spartan," Captain Keyes congratulated Mike, then to his ship he called out, "All stations: brace for cast-off."

In response, the Autumn began its launch sequence. The gantries holding the Halcyon-class light cruiser in place fell away and a series of small atmospheric rocket pods fired on either side to move it away from the dock. Once clear they fell away and the twin fusion drive engines glowed blue and began to take the ship out of orbit.

Mike watched the ship safely disappear into the clouds before climbing down the ladder from the Mass Driver. He even noticed the rain had stopped.

"This is the Pillar of Autumn. We're away. And the Package is with us," Captain Keyes confirmed.

Mike stood looking at the clouds. Atmospheric activity continued and so lightning flashed through the clouds though the rain continued to hold off. Once again the Lone Wolf stood alone, but this time though he was content, knowing he'd accomplished what needed to be done not only for the cause, but for those he cared about. But there was one more task to perform. It was his turn.

****Chapter 40****

****August 30, 2552 20:00 Hours, Sydney, Australia, Planet Earth

Natalia looked over the darkening night sky. Lights around the city were beginning to twinkle as were stars out over the ocean. A cool breeze blew inland as the woman stood on the balcony of her luxurious condo. She looked in the direction of Reach, miles and miles away and suddenly felt the vastness of space and the gulf between them. It's wasn't the miles though, it was the loss. Word had gotten back that Reach had fallen. She'd known it in her heart since she'd been extracted but couldn't admit it to herself.

The woman had used her position within the Office of Naval Intelligence to study the unit returns coming off planet and the casualty lists and there were no listings for Noble Team or for Mike-B312.

In a way it had been an inevitability. Spartans were not the type of troops you evac, despite their incredible value and worth. That was the irony of the UNSC command structure. Those of most value were the most expendable. But then she had to admit he'd become precious to her so she was biased. No, Reach had fallen and everything they'd done had been for nothing. Still, there was talk about some incredible data that had been retrieved from the planet that could shift the war. Unfortunately it was said to be on a UNSC cruiser that was missing.

The good news just kept piling up.

Natalia's door buzzer went off signaling to the woman the arrival of her father and MacKenzie. She sighed heavily, suddenly feeling as if gravity had increased in her condo three fold.

Opening the door the conflicted woman found her father with a tight look on his face as if he were distracted and her would-be suitor with an awkward smile on his. After some small talk that did nothing but increase the tension among the trio her father finally got down to business.

"Natalia, we've been concerned about you since you returned from Reach," Spanner began.

"Yes, and you were concerned enough to interfere in what I was doing there," she retorted sourly.

Her father ignored the jibe. "You don't seem to be adjusting well to being back. It might be good for you to talk to someone about this."

"Someone? As in a shrink?" Natalia couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I've been back what, three days? Do you have any clue what happened there?"

"I thought we cleared that all up at lunch today," her father pressed. "You've been through a trauma, it's normal especially for people who aren't used to combat. It's no big deal. I just want to see your life get back to normal."

"Normal?" Natalia's voice broke. "I don't want to go back to what you think is normal. I don't want that," her voice rose with emotion as she emphasized the point. "It was fake. I had no clue who I was or what I wanted."

"Come on Tali, you don't mean that," MacKenzie interjected smoothly. "I can't imagine how tough it would have been for you there, how much you suffered. You just need some time and then you'll see clearly again," he tried to encourage her but it came off sounding condescending.

"Stop telling me what I'm thinking and how I feel," Natalia yelled in exasperation at the pair. "And suffered? Both of you know nothing about suffering. I'm supposed to be a soldier, an officer. People suffer every day in this fight. Why not me? I've never suffered a day in my life."

Before the exasperated pair of men could respond to the impassioned plea, the translucent blue form of a Renaissance gentleman wearing fine clothes appeared from the data device Spanner Misriah held. "Sir, I need to speak to you on an urgent matter," the Artificial Intelligence form interjected.

"Nicolo, I told you not to bother me right now," Spanner growled.

"I understand that, sir. Do you think I would disobey your order without good reason?" the AI responded a bit imperiously. "Something has come up."

"What?"

"Our plan may have been discovered" the Smart AI answered.

What? By who?" Spanner Misriah snapped to attention.

"Another AI has been snooping around."

"Who?"

"I'm not certain." Nicolo responded, a slight touch of embarrassment in his confident voice.

"What do you mean? You're supposed to be a Smart AI and figure this stuff out," Misriah pressed aggressively.

"I'm smart enough to know, Mr. Misriah, that there might be others smarter than me," Nicolo admitted.

An irritated sigh came from Spanner Misriah. "Very well. Enhance security protocols. Soon it won't matter. How is the timetable?"

"Secondary production sites are on-line, tertiary sites will be operational within 36 hours," Nicolo reported.

"Good. And the inventory?"

"Is being loaded as we speak. The transport will all have the proper paperwork as specified."

"All right. Keep me posted," Misriah ordered as the translucent Renaissance gentleman disappeared with a formal bow.

Natalia looked at her father accusingly. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," he answered, avoiding her penetrating stare.

"MacKenzie?"

"Don't look at me," he raised his hands defensively in a classic cop out.

Natalia looked with probing eyes at the pair who were again trying to keep her out. Then, as if by divine revelation, it hit her.

"You're moving everything off of Mars," she declared accusingly. Before her father or MacKenzie could sputter out a denial she cut them off. "Don't even bother trying to deny it. I can see it in your eyes. Why?"

"I'm merely taking precautions," her father answered, regaining his confident veneer.

"Because you know Reach has fallen and you figure Mars is next?" his daughter pressed.

"Perhaps," he said evasively.

"And have you informed the Industrial Council of this?" she pressed, her eyes narrowing. "Have you gotten permission?"

"It's my company, I don't need anyone's permission to do what I want," he spit out angrily.

And there it was. Spanner Misriah always did what he wanted. Natalia looked at her father, having confirmed what she'd always known but was afraid to admit. The woman then looked to her would-be suitor MacKenzie and saw nothing but compliance in him and suddenly she felt free.

"Well, since we seem to be confessing secrets let me tell you mine," Natalia declared. "I met someone on Reach," she confessed, suddenly feeling awkward and averting the stares of the two men.

"What do you mean 'you met someone'?" her father asked in a low tone, his eyes narrowing.

Natalia took a deep breath, closed her eyes and fixed on Mike's scarred by expressive face, gaining courage from the image. "One of my teammates. Weâ€|we had a connection. Weâ€|"

Her father cut her off. "A Spartan?" he declared incredulously.

"Yes, a Spartan," she responded, anger flaring at his condescending tone.

Spanner Misriah shook his head derisively at the perceived youthful

fling. "All right," he let the words trail off as he processed the revelation then shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "I guess I can see it. They're pretty impressive physical specimens."

"It wasn't like that," Natalia protested at the base response from her father. "Or it's not just that. Yes, he's handsome but it's more. He taught me how to fight even when I screwed up and compromised the team. He stood by me when no else would. I could tell him things I've never told anyone else," she tried to explain her own confused feelings. "He believed in me."

"Natalia I almost believe you developed feelings for this engineered weapon," her father stated in disbelief.

"He's a person!" her voice rose at the callous comment. "His name is Mike and I love him," she declared, looking down at the expensively carpeted floor and feeling her eyes well up with tears.

The sound of air escaping from MacKenzie was evident to all in the room and a short yelp came out of the young man.

Natalia suddenly realized what a shock and disappointment this would mean to her would-be suitor. "MacKenzie, I never meant to hurt you," Natalia tried to comfort the man.

The man took a deep breath. "Okay, so you hooked up with a Spartan on Reach. I'm not real happy about it but considering the circumstances I understand," MacKenzie declared trying to sound magnanimous though his face displayed anger. "I forgive you."

"I'm not looking for your forgiveness, dammit," Natalia exploded at the arrogant statement, "and I'm not asking for your permission," she turned to her father. "I'm trying to tell you I've changed, things are different."

"Natalia, stop being ridiculous," Spanner cut in. "Don't throw everything away on some fling with a dead soldier."

Natalia froze for a moment at the callous remark and then rage engulfed her face like a volcano exploding. Her father actually shifted backwards at the aggressive posture of his daughter but he was too late. She slapped him full across the face and spit out, "How dare you say that!"

Everything stopped and the two men could do nothing but stare at the aggressive woman. Spanner Misriah didn't move, despite the red mark on his cheek and MacKenzie was afraid to even flinch. Both finally realized this was not the same woman who'd left for Reach only weeks earlier and each then knew they had to let her go.

Satisfied she'd made her point, Natalia put her hands on her hips, feeling Mike's dog tags brush between her breasts on the chain she wore them which excited her and declared, "And Mike is not a soldier, he's a Spartan. And haven't you heard? Spartans never die; they're only Missing In Action."

****August 30, 2552 20:00 Hours Aszod, Eposz, Planet Reach****

Mike watched the sky for some time. The rain had stopped and despite the late hour it became light behind the banks of thick clouds. Two

Banshees zoomed past, uninterested in his presence and carried on to another area. For a moment Mike thought he'd been forgotten and was merely left stranded on the planet. But then a Phantom approached the Spartan's position followed by another and then another. No, he'd not been forgotten, the Covenant was massing to finish once and for all the human nuisance that had stopped them on so many occasions during their invasion of the planet.

Mike sighed heavily as he moved away from the platform and prepared for what he knew was going to be his final battle. He began to recall his experiences during the fight for Reach. Had it only been a month? He couldn't believe he'd only arrived on July 24th.

A lot can change in a month, he thought to himself.

Certainly it was more than had changed in the last ten years. He'd been reunited with his friend from training Kat, he'd earned a place on Noble Team, he'd met Mandy and so many others. Then there was Natalia.

He shook his head, as if to clear out all the conflicting thoughts. Could he survive? Alone? No way. The quick-thinking man realized the Covenant had decided long ago to take Reach and no single man- make that no single Spartan -could stop them. He'd fought long and hard and gave Reach his all to achieve this point. He'd fight to the end but he finally realized he owed Reach nothing. He owed the UNSC nothing and finally it dawned on him- he owed the Nantz family legacy nothing. His efforts, his alone, would live on in the annals of history, just like his forefather had done. Hell, people might even sing his praises for centuries to come, if humanity lasted that long.

Be the Lone Wolf if you desire, a small voice whispered in his ear, _and fight for all you can, but you know this is not a battle you can win. It's time to say goodbye._

"I'll make you all proud," Mike said to himself, as he checked the ammo count on his weapon. He'd take the fight to the relentless invader one last time.

Travelling out into the remnants of the sprawling Sinovet Ship Breaking Complex he began to pass the bodies of troopers that had given their lives to hold the facility.

Why should things be any different for me than for any of them? Mike thought to himself, as he paused to stock up on ammo and grenades. _There's no happy ending for any of us._

The Spartan pushed out further as more Covenant dropships flew in to disgorge their contents in the distance. _Yea, I'm nothing special, _he thought_, just like all these others_, but strangely that gave him comfort. He was like the others. He was a soldier, serving his country and his people despite all that had been done to him and all he had done.

Then Mike froze.

He saw several bodies that were bigger and armored differently from the others. "Are those Spartans?" Mike asked himself.

There was no opportunity to investigate as several plasma rounds sizzled in, two hitting him full on. Led by three Elites, a group of Grunts came screaming in to finish off the Lone Wolf. All thoughts left his mind as he went into combat mode.

Throwing a grenade and then following up with a stream of fire from his Assault Rifle, Mike took down the first Sangheili, disrupting the attack of the Unggoy in the process. He pushed right through them, spraying fire as he went not to damage but to disrupt. Another grenade stopped the waddling attackers from reforming while he charged in to beat one of the howling Elites down with the butt end of his weapon. The third one fired and hit him with his Plasma Pistol but they were only glancing blows which Mike's shield absorbed.

The Spartan didn't stop, bulling in again but this time coming in low and driving his shoulder into the mid-section of the Sangheili. With a whoosh of air the taller Elite doubled over allowing Mike to drive his rifle butt into the back of the warrior's head, stoving in its skull.

Yet another section of Grunts and Elites joined the fight just as Mike had finished the first one off, followed by another larger group. Mike emptied his Assault Rifle so switched out for the DMR he carried. Firing controlled bursts and moving he was again able to disrupt the cohesion of the assault against him but he was also starting to take more hits and he watched his shields start to drop precariously.

Several more direct hits and the alarm claxon went off. Mike retreated, popping a Drop Shield to recover within but he couldn't wait, more were massing so he rushed out and re-entered the fray.

But there were too many.

Again his shield drained and before he could recharge a salvo of fire hit him. The Plasma formed and began to cause degeneration to his armor. The Lone Wolf killed more than he could count, the number didn't matter anymore, but still they came. His shield couldn't regenerate and so he felt the sizzling sting of the plasma burn through his armor and sear his skin. His helmet held but a small crack appeared in the visor. Mike knew the situation was getting desperate so he again popped a Drop Shield to give himself a breather.

Then on a high arcing trajectory a Plasma Mortar round landed by the shield, disrupting it. A Wraith had entered just as Mike took fire from several flying Covenant aircraft. It seemed like everyone was joining the party now. But there was a cost to entry and despite the increased hits he was taking he made them pay the price in full. Grunts fell by the dozens, Elites fell as well. Fortunately for Mike as his weapon ran out there were others around from fallen brothers who were almost reaching out from the grave to assist in this final desperate fight. He honored their memories by killing more of the cursed invaders.

But there were just too many.

Mike continued to fight ferociously holding on for as long as possible but he armor continued to be degenerated. A second, larger,

crack appeared in his visor as the continued salvos of plasma splashed all over him. But he fought on, throwing grenades, beating aside all comers but inevitability was against him. Steadily being penned in with lessening room to maneuver, the Covenant attackers seeking blood revenge on the Spartan penned him in with the sheer weight of numbers. Their fire was relentless, irregardless of casualties to their own side from missed shots. They had the singular purpose of destroying this man.

The Spartan's shield went down for the last time and his armor was

breeched. The alarm claxon went off as his MJOLNIR armor's environmental system failed. Unable to breath in the vacuum sealed helmet Mike ripped it off and tossed it to aside and continued to fight.

Confident this was the Spartan's last stand the most powerful of the Elite's aligned against him waved off the Grunts and lesser Sangheili, each wanting the glory of this one last kill.

But there was still some fight left in Mike-B312.

An Elite charged in at Mike, firing a plasma rifle but the Spartan met the attack, standing tall and shredding the warrior with a sustained burst from his assault rifle. A golden-armored Sangheili General moved in for the attack from behind hoping to skewer Mike with an energy sword. Instead Noble Six deflected the sizzling blow and knocking the Elite to the ground he killed it with several precise rounds from his pistol.

But there were just too many of the motivated attackers.

Mike was hit by a concentrated barrage of plasma fire, staggering him. Wounded and bleeding, he still managed to stay standing. Holding his Assault Rifle at the hip in the right hand and the pistol in the left, Noble Six continued to fight not only for his team but for all who lost their lives in the futile effort to save Reach, killing a Sangheili Minor and Major before another white-armored Ultra bull rushed into the gap, knocking the Spartan roughly to the ground.

An Elite Zealot claimed the kill. Waving the others off the warrior raised his Energy Sword preparing to stab the downed Noble Six. But Mike had another plan so kicked the Elite away with a hard thrust, knocking the Energy Sword out of the Zealot's hand. The Ultra who'd first knocked Mike to the rocky ground pounced on the Spartan. Mike managed to elbow the Ultra in the jaw. The Zealot recovered and came right back in deftly drawing its Energy Dagger, and finally stabbed him deep into the chest. Mike howled in pain and the anguish of defeat just as a stealth-armored SpecOps Sangheili came to stand over him, the tips of its Energy Sword only inches from his face.

Mike closed his eyes and prepared for what was to come. He was calm and ready to cross through the dark gates to the next part of his journey. In some ways he looked forward to it. No longer would he have to answer to those who would use him for his own gain, no longer would his heart ache at the thoughts of Natalia and what could have been, no longer would he even have to be confused about Mandy and the affection she'd expressed which had only made things more complicated, and no more would he have to live with the Nantz family

legacy. No, he was ready to go.

The SpecOps Elite raised the Energy Sword quickly; screaming in triumph when the sharp crack of a Sniper Rifle ripped through the air followed by another in short order. The Zealot flopped to the ground, its maw ripped open by the round that had gone through it as did the Spec Ops Sangheili, killed by a similar head shot. The whine of an inbound Pelican could be heard above the din only for a moment before the sound of its 70mm chin mounted Chain Gun opening fire overwhelmed the din.

Mike was near unconscious from loss of blood from his multiple wounds when he saw a pair of armored boots out of his hazy eyes. A cool feeling began to fill his body as a canister of Biofoam was inserted into the receptacle in his armor.

"Come on Six, let's get you out of here," a vaguely familiar voice seemed to call him from a distance as the pain and confusion of the moment overwhelmed him as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Mike regained consciousness and found himself lying on the metal deck of a Pelican flying as fast as it could. Rubbing his eyes and shaking his head to regain his faculties he sat up, still wobbly and his eyes focused on the bald head of Jun, reloading one of his Sniper Rifle magazines with 14.5x114mm ammo.

"How you doing, Six?" the cerebral sniper asked, a sparkle in his eyes.

"Hurts like hell," Mike grunted.

"At least you're alive."

All at once. Like a high speed data upload, it all clicked for Mike. "Hey, how'd you know where to find me?"

Jun chuckled. "Ran into a cute medic and a Master Sergeant who looked like he should be holding a box of donuts not a shotgun at the last extraction point left on the planet. Hopefully it'll still be there when we get back cause we're cutting it close."

"Butâ€¦," Mike was still confused and increasingly groggy.

"They said you might need an extract since you'd likely never go off on the Autumn."

"Did it get away?" Mike asked, eyes closed, willing that the team's last sacrifice would not be for nothing.

"Yea, apparently it jumped but who knows where," Jun answered.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't all for nothing. Still, the cost had been high. "Emile's dead. So is Commander Carter," he declared, informing his teammate of recent developments.

"I figured that," the sniper responded without emotion.

"Did the cute medic make it off the planet?" Mike asked, now wanting to find out about Mandy.

"She did. Also said to pass on a message: she said to look her up when you have a minute," Jun reported. "What's that all about?"

Mike couldn't help but smile despite his physical and emotional pain. He closed his eyes and leaned back onto the side wall of the drop ship. "It's a long story."

"We got time, dude," Jun replied, interest peaked at the strange conversation during this last stand. "Oh, and when we get off planet, there's someone who wants to talk to you."

The Pelican did make it with all of five minutes to spare before the last transport lifted off from the lost planet of Reach. What once had been a crown jewel of the UNSC was now completely lost but for Mike Nantz, it was not all lost. Though he'd suffered and lost those he'd come to love he'd lost something he'd been trying to shed for years- the legacy that had driven him to fight as the Lone Wolf. From now on he'd blaze a new legacy, one of his own making. Taking out the battered medal he'd carried for years he couldn't help but smile. Despite the seemingly bleak future for humanity his was now one he'd craft.

41. Chapter 41

****Epilogue ****

****September 8, 2552 14:23 Hours, Office of Naval Intelligence
Headquarters, Sydney, Australia, Planet Earth ****

"What do you have for me, Black Box?" Admiral Parangosky asked after returning from her meeting with the UNSC Security Committee to her office in HIGHCOMM Facility Bravo-Six. The always scheming woman was both frustrated by her peers and fascinated by what she'd been told. Yet, with the fall of Reach much had changed and even she, as powerful as she was, had to admit to a growing note of concern in her own mind. They needed to do everything they could to keep the Covenant from discovering Earth.

The elderly, yet still vigorous woman in her 90's needed a distraction and she hoped her equally scheming AI would provide it for her. Settling into a luxurious leather chair the admiral's ever present executive assistant Captain Osman handed her a cup of coffee. Taking a small sip she called out, "Okay Black Box. I know you're there so what do you have for me?"

The Smart AI who eschewed the form of a human avatar instead appeared as a featureless box. "Good afternoon admiral. A pleasant meeting, I hope?"

"Yes, yes. You already know everything that happened there so you'll know if it was good or not for me. I need information."

"Well, Colonel Ackerson is up to something pertaining to the Spartan program. He has taken the annoying step of no longer using datapads to capture his information but has instead started to," the AI paused as if horrified, "writing them down by hand."

"Interesting, but not that interesting," Parangosky baited the proud AI, knowing how to play it like she did everyone else.

"Golf 51979 seems to be moving production off of Mars," Black Box reported somewhat huffily, using Spanner Misriah's military id.

"That's interesting, go on."

"He's tried to hide it and his annoying AI Nicolo did a good job of masking what was going on. I have to admire that," Black Box added, his tone confirming the sentiment.

"But in the end you found out?"

"In the end I found out."

"And none of the appropriate groups have been notified?" the admiral confirmed. "How rude of Mr. Misriah."

"I can't see how that makes much of a difference with Reach fallen ma'am," Captain Osman interjected.

"Its information and information always makes a difference regardless of the situation," the admiral taught her young protégé. "It all depends on what you want to use it for." Returning her focus to the AI she stated, "Continue to monitor and let me know where it all ends up. I may have need of some new toys."

"Very well, admiral," Black Box confirmed. "Oh, and there's one other thing. It appears as if Spanner's little princess got herself rather involved with a certain member of Noble Team."

"Well, now that is interesting information," Parangosky purred to herself as Captain Osman stood behind the scheming woman quietly. "So do tell," the admiral perked up, suddenly very interested in the report.

"It seems that during the course of her time serving on Reach our young Natalia developed feelings for one of the Spartans on the team. Surprisingly they were reciprocated by the soldier and an intimate relationship developed."

"Did theyâ€¦", Parangosky's voice trailed off as a series of delicious images filled her mind.

"Admiral!" Black Box protested.

"You will allow an old woman her fantasies," she sighed.

"You humans never cease to amuse me. Fixated on such base things," the AI responded somewhat imperiously. "And besides, I must confess, there are some things even I don't know."

"And dear Natalia failed to let me know this during my debriefing with her. An oversight I'm sure," the admiral stated, her eyes narrowing menacingly.

"Apparently," the AI answered. "Regardless, the relationship has impacted her still since she's returned. Word is she has severed her relationship with MacKenzie Wainwright."

The admiral snorted. "His loss. That boy was always a bit of a wimp. So who was the Spartan in question?"

"Correction, who is."

"Is? He's alive?" the admiral exclaimed, truly surprised for the first time in recent memory.

"Yes, remarkably Spartan B-312 Mike made it off Reach on the last ship," Black Box confirmed, bring up a holo image of the ship's personnel return. "They're still en route following the Cole Protocol and on their way back to Earth."

"312, as in, 'The Lone Wolf, B-312?"

"One and the same."

"I can see why Ackerson has gone quiet all of a sudden," the admiral commented, her mind already working. Margaret Parangosky stopped speaking and steepled her fingers, leaning her elbows on the desk, brilliant mind deep in contemplation. "Yes, this is very useful. Captain Osman, bring this Lone Wolf to me when he reaches Earth."

As that conversation was coming to its peak Natalia walked briskly to her office at the Hive after taking a long lunch. She didn't care and no one around her seemed to notice. The woman who had once been the center of attention now seemed almost shunned. That was totally fine with her. She'd finally seen war and the truth of human suffering in the face of intense adversity. So now back on Earth the political ambitions and social climbing of those at ONI headquarters sickened her. No, she had a few new ideas of what she should do going forward but she still needed to think some things through.

One thing she hadn't had to think through was her new tattoo. She'd gotten a large wolf's head tattooed on and around the Stinger tattoo she'd had on her shoulder blade. It still stung but it felt good and was a good reminder. It was her way of remembering.

On the way back, passing an apartment building the words Remember Reach were spray painted on a ramp to a parking area. Word had already gotten out despite the efforts of the UNSC High Command to keep it quiet. Natalia was happy for that. There was far too much that had gone on behind closed doors.

No, she did remember Reach. It had changed her life and she was glad about that, despite the sadness that still ate away at her over the loss of Mike.

Two hours later Natalia sat at her desk, going through the motions for yet another day preparing to leave the office and go to the gym to work out. Invigorated by her time in the field and determine to be in the best shape she could for the days to come the woman had thrown herself into an intense fitness regime.

Still, though freed from the implied shackles of her father and his expectations and free of MacKenzie, she really had no sense of purpose. They both finally seemed to get it, to understand, in their own ways, what had happened and that she'd changed. Natalia was happy for that and wondered if perhaps she and her father might be able to have an actual father-daughter relationship. But then there was

MacKenzie. The handsome executive had continued to nip around the periphery, trying to win her back.

Natalia sighed involuntarily as she realized she'd never truly be free.

Still an officer in ONI she had work to do. It was nominal and mundane, make-work really, but she needed to do it and she needed something to do. Her day had been spent sifting through reports from the field. Scanning them for information useful to the intelligence community her heart ached to be back out in the field and away from the confines of a desk. The adrenaline surge of combat had been intoxicating to her but then she realized much of it had to do with being with Mike. Without him there just wasn't the appeal.

The next file was thick and the title caused her to start:

Planet Reach Invasion-After Action Reports: Classified

She wasn't sure she could bear to read but then something also drew her to them. She'd scanned the other reports before but this one she read. Despite much of what was being reported on was unfamiliar and in parts of the planet she didn't know there were lots of areas she knew intimately. It struck her just how unprepared the UNSC had been for the invasion. I'd never have been allowed to go if we had, she thought to herself glumly as she continued to turn over document after document.

When Natalia came to the Battle of New Alexandria which only reminded her of how she'd been pulled out before the end she could take it no longer. There was nothing useful in this file either to ONI or to her. It only brought back bad memories.

She slammed the file closed upside down in frustration and the force caused several of the last documents to squirt out. Jamming them together though one document caught her eye and her quick mind began to examine it. One line on the page caused the shocked woman to feel as if the world and her heart had stopped at the same time.

Mike was alive. The Lone Wolf lived.

****The end****

Thanks to all of you who've been with me on this journey. I enjoyed writing the story and hope you like how it came out. As you can see, it was left completed but with the option to carry on to new adventures. After a bit of a break I'll look for my next writing project in the New Year.

I appreciate a lot all of you who've read this novel (if you like it send it to 343 Industries!). The reviews and support were very encouraging. Thank you; Halo is a special community and I'm glad to be part of it. Special thanks to some special people who've been with me longest on this journey: 1-1 Marines, Rylek196, Sierral07, GuntherRiechwald, Goldheartedhobo, Darth Meta, halobeast-117 and Radar112495 for the inspiration for the Master Sergeant Buckah character.

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End
file.